MANDALAPTOP
The Sound of Ice
WAR AND PEACE

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Foreword

Hi everyone! Thank you so much for checking this book out. It's wild every once in awhile to come back to Wattpad and see how Cameron and Sam live on. I was 16 when I wrote this over a hot, quiet summer in Ontario. I'm 22 now, at the time of typing this—it's crazy how much time has passed and how many things have changed, and yet these characters and this story are still here, and people are still connecting with them. Cameron and Sam have such a special place in my heart. I'm not really on Wattpad much anymore, but I do come back to poke my head in every once in awhile and say hello and respond to messages. Thank you for being here, and thank you for reading.❤ Lots of love, M

~

I thought I should include a bit of hockey background. The focus of this story isn't solely on hockey, so don't worry if you don't know anything about the sport. However, Cameron Beckett (the main character) plays in a certain league I thought I should explain.

The CHL (Canadian Hockey League) is an organization for skilled hockey players aged 16 - 20. It is the most common route that players looking for a future with hockey take before being drafted for the NHL (National Hockey League). The CHL consists of 60 teams and is split up into three categories - the OHL, the WHL, and the QMJHL. Teams compete for the Memorial Cup. Players are drafted by teams, meaning they don't pick where they play. Cameron was drafted for his hometown team, so he didn't have to move. However, some of his teammates were drafted from cities further away, so they billet with local families during the season and attend the local school. Cameron's team and town, the St. Anne Lions, are FICTIONAL! I wanted to stay as realistic as possible so I just created a new team instead of trying to write an existing one. The St. Anne Lions are part of the OHL, the Ontario Hockey League.

~

(P.S. As you read, be sure to check out my Spotify playlist in bio! They're all songs that remind me of Sam & Cam / inspired my writing.)

(P.P.S. Current amazing cover art creds go to @Illustraice !! Check them out on social media at the same username)

1

There are many situations I would rather be in. Getting chewed out by your coach isn't fun. At all.

"Beckett, are you listening to me?"

I glance up. Coach is pacing in front of me, his shoes slapping the concrete of the locker room floor. Behind him, a row of navy blue lockers flash in the fluorescent lighting. His face is twisted in a disappointed frown. God, I hate that face.

"Yeah, Coach."

"You can't let your grade slip like this. You understand? Being a good hockey player means nothing if you're failing out of high school."

"I'm not failing -"

"Really?"

"Just that one class -"

"Beckett, I know your future is hockey. I get it, okay? But you have one more year of high school, and it matters. You're the co-captain of this team."

"Yes, sir."

"What class is it, math?"

"Yes. Pre-calculus."

Coach pulls at his tie. "Can you find a tutor or something?"

"I think I can, yeah."

"Do so. Immediately. Or you're benched tomorrow."

I wonder if he's serious. The St. Anne Lion's can't afford to bench me. Then again, he hardly ever jokes.

"I will," I say. "I swear."

Coach puts his hands on his hips and stares at me, and I fight the urge to look away. I instinctively reach up and push my baseball hat lower on my head.

"Alright, get outta here," he says, and I don't hesitate.

~

Ethan Craley is leaning against the hallway wall with his bag hooked under his arm, the blue light of his phone illuminating his face. He glances up and grins as I walk through the locker room door.

"So," he says, the smile still on his face as he struggles to match my fast pace. "Another argument with Coach. What was it this time? Matthew again?"

"My grades," I say. "He says he's going to bench me."

Ethan laughs. "I can't wait for that day."

I roll my eyes. Ethan is the team goalie, and we've been best friends ever since he was drafted to the Lions last season. He billets with a family near me, so I usually give him a ride home.

We push open the glass doors of Parkway Stadium, immediately shivering in the cold autumn air. Clouds in the sky hide the moon, and yellow streetlights shine brightly. Across the street of the stadium, St. Anne is lit up colorfully. We don't have skyscrapers or anything here, but downtown is always a fun place to be at night.

Ethan and I slide into my car and he cranks up the heat.

"I hate your car," he complains loudly, waving his hand in front of the choking air vent.

"Give it a sec," I mutter, clicking in my seatbelt. My car may be old and crappy, but we're tight, okay?

Ethan flips through the radio channels and settles on an old station, and I smile. We play this game every time. He pretends he wants to listen to pop music, but he always ends up picking the 80s channel.

"So," he says as I merge on the highway. "You're failing school?"

I squint at my mirrors. "Just pre-calc," I say, and shiver. This car's heating really is not the best. "Can you tutor me?"

"Man, I can't do math for shit."

"You're not failing though."

"I guess." Ethan cracks his knuckles and leans against the window, squinting at the lights blurring past. "You can ask Mrs. Godfrey for extra credit."

"Mrs. Godfrey hates me."

"Yeah, you're not very well liked, are you?" He's smiling. I roll my eyes.

"Don't need to be well liked when you're good at hockey," I say, expecting a witty reply, but it doesn't come. Ethan cracks his knuckles again and we sit in silence, the quiet music crackling through the speakers.

I drop Ethan off at his family's house and he waves as he hurries inside the house. Since Ethan is from Ottawa, he had to find a family to billet him. Not that it's hard - there are plenty willing to do it here. He got lucky with his family, though. They live in one of the biggest houses in St. Anne - two stories, four bedrooms, and a huge backyard.

I usually don't mind having Ethan in the car, but I like driving alone. The car hums beneath me as I turn down the main streets, finally pulling up to

my house. It's across the street from the railroad tracks, so it's never very busy. I lock the car and hurry inside.

Veronica is sprawled out on the couch, her hand intertwined with Paul's and her head on his shoulder. An NHL game plays on the television.

I toss my keys on the kitchen table and they both turn to look at me.

"Hey, Cameron," says Veronica, my twin. Technically, she's fourteen minutes older, as she likes to point out every single day. "How was practice?"

"Fine," I say, grabbing a banana from the fruit basket. "Hey, Paul."

"Hey, dude," says Paul in his bland, monotone voice, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Veronica squints at me like she knows what I'm thinking, and her grip tightens on Paul's hand protectively.

"Where's Mom?" I ask. The house seems empty.

"I don't know, sleeping? It's already ten o'clock."

"Is it? Practice ran late."

Veronica and Paul turn back to the TV, apparently no longer interested in me. I walk down the hallway, the wooden floorboards squeaking under my socks, and toss my hockey bag on the bed. On my desk, papers and textbooks are jumbled in a disorganized mess . I groan.

"Hey, Cameron!" Hailey sticks her head in my doorway and grins, her front tooth missing.

"Hi, Hailey," I say, sitting on the edge of my bed and pulling off my baseball hat. I run my hand through my sweaty hair. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"Nope!" My little sister dances in the doorway, wearing her favorite pink princess pajamas. Her damp hair smells like strawberry shampoo.

"Why not?"

"'Cause I don't wanna."

I smile. "Well, you should go to bed now. Unless you want to help me with my homework."

"No way!" She runs from my room and I hear her door shut down the hall, the room she shares with Veronica. I sigh, almost dizzy with exhaustion, and rub my face, blinking sleepily. My walls are covered in hockey posters I put up when I was six, Hailey's age, and my shelves are lined with trophies.

I shower quickly, the hot water only lasting a minute or two, and throw on flannel pants and a Lions sweatshirt. The amount of merch this team gives you is crazy. I find Veronica in the kitchen, eating cereal as she scrolls through her phone.

"Is Paul gone?" I ask.

"Yeah, he just left."

I sit in the seat beside her and rest my head on my arm. "I need a math tutor," I say, my words muffled in the folds of my sweatshirt.

She doesn't glance up. "Why? Are you failing?"

"Yeah."

"Yikes."

"Shut up. I know."

She crunches loudly on her bite of cereal, and a piece of hair falls out of her loose ponytail. We look almost exactly the same - dark brown hair, green eyes. Except I'm the hotter one. At least, I think so. We still fight over that.

"Isn't Sam good at math?"

I frown. "Sam?"

"You don't get out much, do you? Sam is our neighbor."

"Oh, yeah, yeah, I know who he is."

"You should ask him."

"Maybe I will," I say. Even though I'd really rather not. Hockey takes up so much of my time, I really don't know anyone outside of my teammates and a few classmates.

"Maybe you will," she repeats, her spoon clanging against the bottom of the bowl.

I let my eyes shut against the soft fabric of my sweatshirt and breathe deeply. Pre-calc can go to hell. I'd rather sleep.

2

I snap my gum and glance around the room, twisting my pencil through my fingers. Thirty other students have their heads down, their pencils scratching loudly on the thick test packet. Outside, the sky is grey, and trees shake in the wind.

I take a breath and force myself to focus on the math problem in front of me. I can feel Mrs. Gobfrey staring at me from the front of that room. I swear, that woman is out to get me.

Fifteen minutes later, the bell rings and I hand in my test with everyone else. I ended up just plugging in random equations. I mean, I'm already failing in this class. What else do I have to lose?

At lunch, the conversation is on hockey. On game days, it always is. On practice days, it usually is, too. What else are Ethan, Luke, Ollie, and I supposed to talk about?

Ethan takes a bite of his sandwich. "Remember that Royals defensemen that tripped Johnson last time and didn't get a penalty?"

"Oh, yeah," says Luke Chan, stabbing at his salad.

Ollie Johnson nods. He's the most recognizable off the ice, with curly red hair and tons of freckles. "I hate that guy," he says.

Luke grins. "Fight him, Ollie."

"Yeah, fight him, Ollie," echoes Ethan, laughing.

Ollie rolls his eyes and scratches his head. "Yeah, yeah," he mutters. Ollie hates fighting. He's the nicest guy on the team.

I lean back in my seat and glance around the cafeteria. I guess East High is kind of cliquey - I mean, the hockey jocks have their own table, at least.

You got the theater kids, the smart kids, the football jocks, the mean girls... I don't know who else. Veronica was right. I don't get out much.

I turn back to my chicken wrap, all soggy and sad, and peel my orange instead. The cafeteria is loud and bright, with chairs scraping back and sneakers squeaking on the floor. I still have to talk to Sam.

"Beckett over here is failing math," says Ethan. I throw my orange peel at him and he ducks, laughing loudly.

"Whatever," I say.

"And Coach is gonna bench him."

Ollie looks genuinely concerned. "Coach can't bench you, Cameron."

Luke shakes his head, his dark hair falling in front of his eyes. "Coach always says stuff like that," he says. He takes another aggressive stab at his salad. "He'll play." The air falls quiet and I chew slowly, waiting for someone to break the silence.

I clear my throat. "I just have to find a tutor," I say.

My teammates nod, and the conversation shifts to another Royals player that they say is the absolute worst.

~

After school, I walk over to Sam's house. Veronica's making me. I stuff my hands in the pockets of my sweatshirt and pull my baseball hat lower, my breath coming out in clouds.

Six houses down to the right, she said. He's right beside the drugstore. Warm, yellow light spills through the narrow windows that line his front door. I knock quickly and bounce on my toes to keep warm.

It swings open and I glance up. "Hey, Sam?" I say, but awkwardly like it's a question.

"Hey, Cameron," he says, surprised. "What's up?"

Okay, if you thought I didn't know who this guy was, I definitely recognize him now. I think we went to preschool together, but he moved away for grade school and didn't come back until a few years ago. He has sandy hair and bright blue eyes, and he's wearing a soft green sweatshirt.

"So, um, you know I play hockey."

"Yeah."

"I kind of need a math tutor, and Veronica said you were good at math? So if you could... I mean, tutor me, that would be awesome, but it's okay if you can't."

He leans against the doorway. He's only an inch or two shorter than me. "Okay," he says, his voice kind. He smiles. "I can tutor you."

"Really? That would be awesome."

"Sure!"

"Okay. I have to go, I have a game tonight, but... yeah, I'll talk to you later?"

"Okay."

"Thanks." I walk away, exhaling, and the door swings shut behind me. That was easier than I thought it was going to be.

~

Ethan is cracking up in the car on the way to the arena.

"Wait, Sam Hughes?" he says. "That kid is way too smart for you."

I frown, glancing in my rear view mirror as someone honks loudly. No one can drive here. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know, he's just like, really smart."

"That's good, idiot."

"Yeah, but like, he's really smart."

"Obviously you're not."

Ethan howls with laughter, and I can't help but crack a smile. This kid is crazy.

~

At the arena, Coach finds me in the locker room as we're dressing up for the game. "Beckett, you find a tutor?"

"Yes, sir."

"You lying?"

"No."

He smiles gruffly. "Good. Now forget about math and only think about this game. You know number 43 is going to be on you all night, he covered you well last time."

"He covered me. I wouldn't say well."

"Don't be cocky, Beckett."

"No, sir."

"You tricked the goalie out last time, he'll be smarter tonight."

"Okay."

"Go for the right corner, he struggles with that."

"Okay."

Coach studies me, pulling at his tie, which is red and blue for the St. Anne Lions. He then nods and walks away, barking at another player.

I pull my jersey over my head, lucky number 21. Ever since my youth hockey team back when I was tiny, I've been number 21. I'm not sure why I like that number so much.

We head out onto the ice for warm up, the stadium already more than halfway full, which isn't bad for a regular season game. The fan base here in St. Anne's is awesome. I was a fan too, before I became a player. My uncle would always take me to the games.

I send a puck flying past Ethan into the back of the net and glance around, chewing on my mouthguard. An overplayed song is ringing through the speakers, and the fans are cheering, wearing red and blue. The air smells like ice and adrenaline, and my fingers are starting to tingle like they do before every game starts, the itch to start playing.

"Alright," says coach minutes later as we're huddled around him. "Chan, watch number 62. Craley, 97 likes the distance shots, so be ready. Gonzalez and Beckett, you two are starting. We need an early goal. Ready?"

Matthew Gonzalez glances up at me. My co-captain. Is he glaring at me right now? That son of a -

"Beckett, Gonzalez, did you hear me?"

"Yes, Coach," says Gonzalez. Coach's sharp eyes shift to me, and I nod.

"Let's go," Coach says, and we do.

And then everything is sweet ice and dripping sweat and flashing lights and deep breaths and hockey. Everything changes when a game starts. It's like life fades and the spotlight is held solely on the puck. That's the only thing I think about. And it's a nice feeling. My blades slice against the ice, and the

puck hits my stick, and the fans are cheering, and it's just nice, okay? I forget everything else. And it's just nice.

"Five goals is impressive," says a smily journalist afterwards in the locker room, holding a mic underneath my face. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail.

"Thank you," I say. My sweaty hair is stuck to my forehead, and my heart is still pounding a bit.

"How do you feel knowing that you're the top prospect for the NHL draft?"

I smile and shrug. "I don't know. That's kind of crazy to think about. Right now, I'm just going to worry about the Lions."

"Is it difficult balancing hockey and high school?"

"I mean, it's something a lot of us here have to do. At least half the team is still in high school, so... it can be difficult at times, but... you know, we have to do it."

"And finally, some fans are wondering about your personal life. Any relationships? Or...?" The journalist raises her eyebrows.

"No," I say, forcing a smile.

"That's all. Great game."

"Thank you."

3

I squirm uncomfortably, cracking my knuckles loudly. Mom shoots me a side glare and I sit on my hands. She gets a little crazy when we're in church.

On the other side of me, Veronica nudges my shoulder. Her short brown hair is straightened, and she's wearing shimmery lipgloss. "Stop fidgeting," she hisses.

Hailey leans over and sticks her tongue out at me. I stick my tongue out back. She understands me.

I'm almost never home on the weekends, since we usually have away games. But lucky me, I'm home for the weekend. So Mom drags us to church.

Mom dips her head and closes her eyes as the priest says something in an old, croaky voice that I can't understand. The Cathedral smells like smoke and old wood, and rain is pounding on the stained glass windows. I rub my face and glance at Mom beside me.

Her eyes snap open like she can see what I'm doing. "Say your prayers, Cameron," she whispers. Her eyes are dark brown and her wavy hair is blonde, like Hailey. Veronica and I got our looks after our dad.

"I am," I whisper back. Satisfied, she closes her eyes again, her lips moving in a silent prayer. My mom is pretty cool. She's always been supportive of hockey. But she is the most religious person I have ever met.

After church, we walk home. Mom and Veronica share an umbrella, and Hailey and I share one. Our only pairs of dress shoes are getting soaked in the puddles. Hailey isn't helping by jumping in all of them.

I breathe in the smell of wet concrete and cold rain, and glance down at Hailey, her small hands over mine on the umbrella handle. She's wearing a

coat over her favorite purple dress.

"What are you going to do today?" I ask loudly over the downpour.

"My friend Annabelle is coming over," she says. "She's bringing her Barbie. Do you want to play with us?"

"Maybe," I say.

"Do you have hockey today?"

"No, not today."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

Veronica looks over her shoulder, her steps in synch with Mom. "He has to study," she says, her lips curling into a smile.

"Yeah," I say. "I have to study."

"Oh no," says Hailey. "I hate studying."

"Yeah, me too."

~

I pull open the front door. Sam is soaking wet.

"Umbrella?" I say.

"I'm only a few houses down," he says, smiling. His sweatshirt is dripping with water, and rain runs down his face. "I thought I could outrun it."

I step back and he walks inside. The front hall is pretty cluttered, snow boots and coats and jackets tossed on the coat rack or on the ground. Veronica waves from the kitchen counter and Mom leans her head around the doorway.

"Hello, Sam!" she says. "So nice to see you again. It's been so long."

"Hi, Mrs. Beckett," he says.

"Are you here to tutor Cameron?"

"Yes."

Veronica laughs. "He needs it."

"Okay, let's go," I say. We go to my room, which I cleaned up a bit earlier when I texted him asking if he could tutor me today. And by cleaning, I mean shoving clothes underneath the bed.

"So, math," I say, pulling out my textbook, then glance at him. "Do you want... like, to borrow a sweatshirt or something?"

Sam shrugs. "If you have one."

I dig through my closet and throw him a old one that I got from a hockey tournament years ago. I clear my throat and flip through the pages in my textbook as he pulls it on.

"Thanks, much better," he says, and runs a hand through his wet hair. "Okay, math."

He sits on the edge of my bed and I pull up my desk chair, and he goes through my homework with a red pen. I don't know what he's doing, but he's making lots of marks.

"Okay," he says slowly when he's done. "This isn't too bad. Let's start with rational functions."

I squint at the paper. "Okay."

"So let's find the intercepts of number one. We need to set f of x to zero, right?" He scribbles something on the paper. His handwriting is crap. "So we solve this equation. How would we do that?"

There's a pause, and I think he wants me to answer. "S-solve - I mean -"

"It's a quadratic, see? So we have to factor." He makes a mark. "Okay, looks like it can't factor. So we plug it into the quadratic formula." He glances up towards the ceiling, so I do too. There's a vintage Toronto Maple Leafs poster that I pasted up there when I was ten. I had to drag a ladder from the garage and it took me forever.

I look back down, and Sam is writing something on the paper. "Okay, so the answer is positive and negative 3.7. You see?"

I don't. "Yeah."

He studies me. His eyes are very, very blue. They might be the bluest eyes I've ever seen in my life. And I have played Barbies with Hailey before.

"You want to try number two?" He pushes the paper towards me, and I groan.

"Let's take a break," I say. "That was a lot of information to keep in my brain."

He smiles again. "That was one problem."

"Baby steps."

"Lazy."

"Lazy?"

"Yeah. You know, you'll be thanking me when you graduate from high school in the spring." He pushes the paper towards me again and I pick up the pencil.

Math problems honestly suck the life out of your soul. I swear to god. I feel like my brain is being shoved through a shredder. I can't even register the passing of time. Math is like a vacuum of torture. "So," I say, desperate for something inside my brain besides numbers. "You want to be like, a mathematician?"

"A scientist," says Sam.

"That's cool."

"Yeah. Working at NASA would be amazing."

"Oh, like a rocket scientist. Impressive"

He shrugs and subconsciously pulls at a thread in my sweatshirt. "That's the dream. What about you? Hockey?"

"Yeah." Okay, by now I'm just sketching cubes beside the problem. He doesn't notice, though. "I mean, it's already kind of set for me. I'll play for the NHL next year."

"Wow."

"Yup. That's the dream." There's silence except for the rain against the window, and I clear my throat. "Are you a Leafs or Senators fan?"

"Leafs, of course," he says.

"Good answer," I say. With St. Anne being right in between the two cities, everyone is torn when it comes to the NHL.

He leans over the bed. "Are you... doodling?"

"Cubes are math-related."

~

An hour and a half later, Sam is waving goodbye to the family. And a little girl named Annabelle.

"No, please stay for dinner!" says Mom, pulling an oven mitt off her hand. There's stew in the kitchen and it smells amazing.

"It's okay, my uncle is waiting for me," says Sam. "Thank you, though." He glances at me. "We can go over math again sometime later this week?"

"Sure," I say. "Thank you."

"Here, take an umbrella, Sam," says my mom, picking up an umbrella off the ground and pushing it into his hands. "You can give it back later."

"Thank you," says Sam, starting to blush. He smiles warmly. "Have a good night."

The second the door shuts behind him, my mom puts her hands on her hips. "That boy is so sweet," she says. "Why aren't you two friends?"

I shrug and sit at the kitchen counter beside Veronica, who probably hasn't moved. She's eating a bowl of cereal. "I don't know," I say. "We're not *not* friends. I'm just busy a lot."

"He's hot," Veronica says, resting her head on her hand. "I mean, he's kind of a nerd, but he's hot."

"Who's hot?" shrieks Hailey, running through the kitchen with her friend Annabelle. They're giggling loudly and waving dolls around.

"The stew is hot!" says Mom. "Are you girls ready for dinner?"

"Yeah, I'm hungry!"

I glance at Veronica, and she smiles tiredly. Outside, thunder rumbles.

4

I'm walking back to French class when I hear it. It's lunch time, so most people are in the cafeteria, but I forgot my textbook. I pause in the hallway and shift my backpack up on my back.

"You little shit," says a harsh voice.

"Ouch!" says another voice, wobbly and hoarse.

Well, shit. I turn the corner, my sneakers echoing off the lockers, to the smoky back hallway where the boys' locker room is. Two guys, one in my grade and one in the grade below me, are holding a scrawny freshman by his jacket collar. His nose is bloody.

"Hey!" I say. "Let him go."

The boy in my grade turns to glare at me. I think his name is Gabe, but I don't know for sure. He's big and buff and on the football team, and his hair is cropped close to his head.

"Beckett," he says slowly.

I would say his name, but like I said, not really sure about that one. I walk over and grab the freshman's arm and yank him towards me. He stumbles and his breath catches, and a drop of blood splatters on the ground.

"We were just having fun," says the guy possibly named Gabe. "Weren't we, Henry?"

The freshman named Henry is looking at the ground and pulling at the sleeves of his sweater. I glare at Gabe. "Pick on someone your own size," I snap.

"Hey, calm down, man," says Gabe calmly. The eleventh grader beside him looks uncomfortable. "Are you offering?"

"No, dude, we're done," says the eleventh grader quietly to Gabe, and he takes off quickly down the hallway. I think he's scared of me. People know I'm good at hockey. I pull the freshman away with me and repeat to Gabe, "Yeah, we're done. Fuck you." Plus, I'm not scared of Gabe. He's big, but he's slow.

Henry and I turn into the main hallway, where grey light is streaming in through the skylights, reflecting off the trophy case. "Sorry, man," I say. I grab some paper towels from the bathroom and hand them to him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he says, his voice shaky. He rubs at his nose. "I'm okay."

"Why were they picking on you?"

He looks like he's going to cry. "W-well, I c-came out to my friends as g-gay."

I don't know what to say. "Oh." Shit, that was stupid.

"Thanks for helping me."

"Y-yeah, of course," I say. "If you need me let me know, okay? I'm Cameron."

"I know," he says. "Thanks." Then he's walking down the hallway. I go to the cafeteria.

~

Hours later, I'm still thinking about the freshman. I toss a baseball up in the air, almost hitting the poster on my ceiling, and adjust the pillow underneath my head. The heating cranks in and my radiator hums, and I hear the front door slam open and shut.

"Cameron?" Mom's voice echoes from the kitchen. "Sam is here."

My bedroom door opens and Sam is there with a stack of books in his arms. "Hey," he says. He's wearing a Harvard sweatshirt. Where would he get a

Harvard sweatshirt?

"Hi," I say. "Do we have to study math right now? I'm tired."

"Don't you have a test tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"What time is your practice?"

I lean over uncomfortably over the side of my bed to look at the old alarm clock on my shelf. "I leave in two hours."

"So, yes." He smiles like he's excited. "Let's get started."

Twenty minutes later, I've managed to get him distracted. We're leafing through old comic books from a box in my closet.

"Spiderman was my favorite," I say, hanging over the edge of my bed. Sam is sitting on the ground, pouring over a Superman one.

"I never had many comics when I was younger," he says, and bites his lip, deep in thought. He turns the page gently. "My uncle bought me a couple, but I wasn't as interested. I liked books better."

He looks up at me. He has an expression on his face that I can't read. I'm very aware of the noise that the radiator is making, and the clanking of dishes from the kitchen down the hall, and the faded engine of a car driving by outside. Then he clears his throat. "Your mom is really nice," he says.

"Yeah, she's cool," I say. "How about your uncle?"

"We're pretty close," Sam says, and looks back down. He runs a hand over the comic. "It's always been just me and him. He's busy with work, though. He works at the car factory down the road."

That's not too surprising. The car factory is St. Anne's largest source of employment.

"That's cool," I say. "My mom is the elementary school secretary."

Sam turns another page and smiles. "You know, my uncle is a big Lions fan. He's been to a couple games this season already."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Suddenly, I want to tell him about Henry, the freshman from earlier. I don't know why. I just do. But I don't.

Sam puts the comic back in the box and yawns. "Okay. Math?"

"Please no."

"C'mon. We need to keep talking about vertical asymptotes."

"Kill me now."

He laughs. And then turns back to my math textbook. Ethan was right. Sam Hughes is very smart.

~

I yank my sweaty jersey off and wince. Practice today was hard. We're all going to be sore tomorrow.

I pull on a fresh t-shirt and sweater and sit on the locker room bench, tying my running shoes. The atmosphere in here is quiet and moody, and locker doors are slamming. Today wasn't a great practice. Coach screamed at us for five minutes straight.

Ethan pulls his baseball hat low over his eyes and leans against the locker beside me, waiting for me to finish, when Matthew Gonzalez walks up. I glance at Ethan.

"I'll wait for you outside," Ethan says, and I internally swear at him as he bolts.

"Beckett," says Matthew.

"Gonzalez," I say. "What's up?"

Okay, what's up is that Matthew and I don't get along very well. He goes to the Catholic school, so luckily we don't see each other as often, but we fight on the ice all the time. I'll give it to you straight: I'm the best on the team. He's the second best. We're both forwards. We're both captains. And we've never liked each other.

"Don't be dumb. You know we set the tone for this team. If we fight, everyone fights. Right?"

"Right," I say slowly.

"Tomorrow is a big game. And I'm not going to let you screw it up for us 'cause you get pissed at me for not passing, or whatever you're mad about."

"Hey, don't put this all on me," I say. I finish tying my shoes and stand up, swinging my bag over my shoulder. "But, agreed. We'll get along tomorrow."

"I'm not losing to the Knights because of you."

I'm a little confused on what this conversation is. But we've had worse. "And I'm not losing to the Knights because of you."

He nods and heads for the door, and I watch the door swing shut behind him. Matthew and I could get along if we tried.

I sigh and pull my baseball hat on my head, ready for some 80s music with Ethan.

5

Okay, I know Matthew and I had our little chat yesterday. But that's not really on my mind as he grabs the back of my jersey and I swing at him.

"Hey! Hey! Break it up!" The ref is tweeting his whistle like crazy and trying to squirm in between us, and our teammates are surrounding us, pulling us apart. Everything is jerseys and flesh and sweat.

Matthew swings at my helmet, but before I can hit back, someone grabs my arm. Another player pulls Matthew away.

"Dude, stop," says the person at my side, shouting over the noise. It's Ethan. I chew on my mouthguard and shake his tight grip off of me, the ref's whistle still ringing in my ear.

The Knights fans in the stands look pissed, or confused. I guess they're not used to seeing players on the same team fighting.

It's the end of the second period, and we're tied. Coach benches both of us for the rest of the game. We lose.

~

"Can somebody tell me what the hell happened out there?" Coach is screaming, spit flying out of his mouth, and Matthew and I are sitting on the bench in front of him like four year olds. The rest of the locker room is cleared out, everyone waiting for us on the bus.

I look at my hands, and Matthew sniffs beside me.

"Somebody better tell me right now." Oh no. His voice is turned dangerously quiet.

"We just got in a disagreement, Coach," says Matthew, a half-mumble.

Coach scoffs. "About what?"

Neither of us say anything.

"I swear to god -"

"Beckett wasn't passing to me all game," says Matthew.

I want to roll my eyes. "Coach, you know that's not true! I was passing -"

"We lost multiple opportunities to score -"

"You having the puck does *not* equal scoring -"

"You knew I was open and you didn't pass it to me because you -"

"I know how to play hockey, I pass the puck when -"

"Enough!" Coach holds up a hand and we fall silent, our voices echoing off the lockers. "That's enough. You're acting like children when you're the captains of this team. I'm disappointed in you both."

I crack my knuckles and keep my eyes on my sneakers. Coach takes a deep breath through his nose.

"I don't tolerate this," Coach says slowly. "You two cost us this win tonight. You fight like that against each other, you get benched. No excuses. No exceptions. We needed this win, and if you two worked together, we would have gotten it."

Matthew rubs his ear. "I know."

"Me too," I say.

Coach opens his mouth, but nothing comes out and he closes it. "I don't even know what to say," he says. "I'm extremely disappointed. Gonzalez, get out. Beckett, stay."

I can't tell if this is good or bad. I think bad. Okay, this is really bad. Gonzalez leaves the locker room and I'm left alone with Coach. The silence hurts my ears.

"You think the NHL is a joke?" His voice is even quieter than before, rough like sandpaper.

"No."

"You really think an NHL wants a player that fights against his own teammates?"

"N-no."

"Your grades are slipping, you're fighting with Matthew, you really think you'll be first pick come draft time if you keep this up?"

"No."

"Yeah, me neither." His words are cold and I feel like crawling into a hole. God, this is the worst. This is the absolute worst.

He leans against the locker and rubs his tired face. When he speaks again, his words are a bit softer. "Is anything going on at home I should know about?"

"No," I say.

"Cameron, you're a good kid. I know you're under a lot of pressure. But you're better than this."

"I know," I say, my voice small. "I'm really sorry. I won't let this happen again."

"Go get on the bus," Coach says, jutting his head towards the door, and I do. I sit alone in the back and turn up the volume on my headphones, watching the darkened silhouettes of trees fly by the window.

~

The next day after school, Coach texts the team and tells us we have the practice off. I'm relieved. I know I have to apologize to Matthew, and that's really not something I'm looking forward to.

I pack my hockey bag and head outside, shivering underneath my sweatshirt in the cool breeze. Brown leaves scatter across small front yards and the railroad tracks, and the sky is a pale blue. Birds squawk on top of crisscrossed power lines.

In a couple minutes I'm at the neighborhood rink, which is old and run-down. The heating is pretty crap, and it's small and dark on the inside - nothing compared to the Parkview Arena the Lions play at. Still, this is where I grew up playing hockey. There are rinks on almost every block in St. Anne, and every one means something special. And this one is special to me.

"Hey, George," I say, stepping through the front doors. George, the manager, is sweeping up the floor.

"Hello, Cameron!" he says, his wrinkled face beaming. He reaches for my arm and grabs it tight. "How are you doing? How is hockey going? I haven't seen you in awhile!"

"Things are pretty good," I say, smiling. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm doing just fine, just fine!" George nods towards the rink, which is empty. Old posters flutter in the darkened rafters. "Are you here to skate?"

"Just for a bit, if that's okay," I say.

"Of course it's okay!" George says. "There's a youth figure skating lesson in a couple hours, but besides that, the ice is all yours."

"Awesome, thanks so much," I say. George nods and reaches up to pat my shoulder before moving on to sweep the bathrooms.

I lace up in my skates and step on the rink, pulling out a few pucks from my bag and tossing them on the ice. The net at the end is a little smaller than

regulation, but it'll do. I shoot pucks until my fingers hurt.

Like I said, the neighborhood rink is nothing compared to Parkview Arena. But there's almost nothing better than the echo of the pucks against the boards and the sound of the ice against my blades.

~

There's laughter in the house and something sizzling on the stove when I step through the front door. I dump my hockey bag near the front door and walk in the kitchen, scratching the back of my neck.

"Finally, he's here!" says Mom. She's chopping cherry tomatoes on the kitchen counter, and Veronica, Sam, and Hailey are laughing together at the crammed table. Sam?

"Hey, everyone," I say slowly, popping a tomato slice in my mouth. Mom swats my hand away.

Sam is still laughing as he flashes a grin at me. "So, you finally get out of math tutoring today."

"Oh - oh, shit!"

"Language, Cameron," Mom says, pointing her knife at me. Hailey giggles, swinging her legs.

"I mean, shoot. I totally forgot we planned to go over math today. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," says Sam.

Veronica squints at me. "Where were you? The rink?"

"Yeah, just messing around. Practice was cancelled today."

"You were gone for awhile."

I shrug. Sue me, okay? It's easy to lose track of time at the rink. I sit in between Veronica and Hailey and across from Sam.

"Sam is staying for dinner," Mom announces loudly, placing a bowl of salad in the middle of the table. "Right, Sam?"

"If you don't mind," says Sam, blushing and looking down at his hands. His eyelashes are long.

"Of course not!" says Mom. She unties her apron and throws it over the back of a chair and sits beside Hailey. "Let's say prayer."

We all take hands and shut our eyes, but I don't focus on what Mom's saying since my stomach is growling loudly. When she's finally done, we dig in.

"So, Sam," Mom says. "Do you play any sports?"

"No, I used to play soccer but I quit a couple years ago," Sam says. "Sports aren't really my thing anymore."

"I play soccer!" says Hailey. She's grinning widely at Sam and - oh, is she fluttering her eyelashes? Oh, no. "I'm good at soccer, right Mum?"

Mom raises her eyebrows and nods, taking a sip of her water. "Very good," she says. "Sam, is math your favorite subject?"

"Mom, enough with the interrogation," says Veronica.

"It's okay," says Sam. "My favorite is probably science, but I like math, too."

"I like science!" says Hailey. Sam gives her a high five and she giggles.

"Do you know where you want to go to university, Sam?" My mom takes a bite of her salad and watches Sam with her full attention. Is everyone in my family in love with him?

"Not yet," says Sam, smiling. "I'm hoping to get a few scholarships. How about you, Veronica?"

"Probably the local college," says Veronica.

It's hard to tell when she says it, but I know she's mad about it. She wants to move away from St. Anne, to a city like Toronto or Montreal or something. But we just don't have the money. Sometimes, I think she hates me. I'll make good money in the NHL, though, and I told her I'd help her pay for university once I can.

When we're done with dinner, Sam, Veronica, and I wash the dishes. I mean, we usually don't. But Sam offered and so Veronica and I had to jump in too. I wash, Sam dries, and Veronica puts them away. Hailey sits on Mom's lap on the couch, watching a hockey game. I smile a little.

When Sam leaves, Mom turns to us when a look on her face.

"That is a very nice boy," she says. "A very nice boy."

"We've heard that," says Veronica, pulling a cereal box down from the cabinet. Honestly, she could eat cereal wherever, whenever.

"A very nice boy, Cameron."

"Yeah, yeah, I know!" Why is she targeting me now? I'm nice, too. But I'll admit, Sam Hughes wouldn't fight Matthew Gonzalez.

6

When the bell rings after math class, Mrs. Gobfrey calls me to her desk. Ethan shoots me a look and shrugs as he packs his books.

"Hey, Mrs. Gobfrey," I say, heading to her desk. She clears her throat as she cleans the white board, her sharp eyes flicking towards me. She's older than most teachers, with short, greying hair, and she always wears a long, dark pencil skirt.

"Mr. Beckett," she says, setting the eraser down. "I graded your test early."

"Oh."

She fumbles through the files on her desk, and I stuff my hands in my pockets so I don't crack them anxiously. She hands me my test packet.

I don't know what to say. "I - I got a C!"

"Yes," she says. I feel like she's fighting a smile, but it's hard to tell with this one. "I can tell you've been studying hard. Keep it up."

"Thank you," I say, flipping through my test in awe. Only a few red marks here and there. I got a C! C is average!

~

As I'm walking to the cafeteria, I see Sam leaning against his locker, talking with people I don't know.

"Sam!" I call. "I got a C!"

He pulls away from his conversation and turns to me. "Hey, Cameron!" he says. "That's great!"

I almost never see Sam at school. We don't have any classes together, obviously. And, thinking about it, we've hardly ever spoken at school. I can't help it now, though. A C, people! In math!

He smiles, shifting the weight of his textbooks in his arms. "Next time, we'll try for a B."

"You might be dreaming a bit there," I say, but I'm smiling too. His friends, a girl with a tight ponytail and glasses and a guy with an afro, are staring at me, and I clear my throat. "Anyway, I'll see you later."

"Bye," Sam says. As I'm walking away, I hear the girl mutter, "He thinks a C is good?"

Oh, ouch. I turn the corner before I hear Sam's reply. I guess I let it go. I stuff my test in my backpack and forget about it. Okay, maybe a C isn't that good.

~

At practice, Matthew won't stop glaring at me.

"Hey, I'm sorry about the other day," I say, even though it hurts a little bit to say out loud. But I have to be the bigger man, right? Take the high road, all that stuff.

He sighs, his jaw set. "Yeah, I'm sorry too," he mumbles. "We were both at fault."

"Yeah."

The rest of the practice is a little tense. Our teammates are still mad that we lost the game. But no one is fighting, at least.

As everyone is heading back to the locker room, Coach stops me. I pull off my helmet and prepare to be yelled at.

"The local news station asked me if they could interview you," he says.

Oh. Well, that's not what I was expecting. "Oh."

"I think it would be good. Just a few basic questions about your career, the IIHF, you know."

"I guess so," I say. "Good publicity, right?"

"Sure," Coach says. He studies me, like I'm a kind of puzzle, and I try not to fidget. "Okay, I'll let them know. I think they want to do it tomorrow. It'll be at your house."

"Okay," I say.

He nods, and that's that. I head to the locker room to change.

~

Mom is freaking out. "They want to interview you *here* ?" She waves her arms around, gesturing to the kitchen. "This house is so tiny! Cameron!"

"Why are you yelling at me? The house is fine. We'll just tidy up a little."

Mom presses her hands to her forehead and closes her eyes, her lips moving silently. Veronica and I glance at each other and try not to laugh.

When she's done praying, I put my hand on the table. "Mom," I say. "It's fine. It'll be good."

"Cameron's gonna be famous!" says Hailey. She's sitting on the floor by Veronica's feet, playing with my old action figures.

"Lord help us all," says Mom dramatically. She pulls out the tupperware container of leftover salad and shakes her head. "Lord help us all."

"Okay, Ma," I say, trying not to smile. "It'll be okay, I promise."

Veronica rests her head against my shoulder and types rapidly on her phone. Probably texting Paul. Sometimes, I forget he exists.

"We're all going to clean the house tomorrow," Mom says. Is she still talking about this? "And wear nice clothes. God knows we have nice clothes but never wear them."

"It's just Channel 5 News," I say. "Only people that are 70 or older watch that."

Mom throws her hands in the air. "I watch Channel 5!"

"Cameron's gonna be famous, Cameron's gonna be famous," Hailey sings, making the action figures dance.

"You're right," says Veronica. I glance at her. She's still looking down on her phone, but I don't like the way she said it.

"Everyone calm down!" I say, starting to get exasperated. "It's just Channel 5."

"Soon it'll be TSN," says Veronica. I go to my room. But I guess she's right.

7

"Cameron, stop fidgeting."

I shoot my mom a look as the two journalists set up the camera. I'm sitting on the itchy couch, my hands on my lap, trying really really hard not to squirm or crack my knuckles. The sky outside is grey, and light streams into the living room.

"Okay," says the female journalist, who introduced herself as Olivia. She connects a microphone to the camera and takes a seat beside me, smoothing out her skirt. "Are we ready to go?"

The other guy named Walter holds a boom mike above our heads and presses record on the very expensive looking camera. I take a deep breath and glance at Mom, Veronica, and Hailey, who are leaning against the wall behind the camera.

Olivia shakes out her curly hair and turns to me, smiling. "Are you ready, Cameron? Remember, we're just having a normal conversation."

"Okay," I say. I wonder if I should sit on my hands. Olivia nods at Walter and clears her throat, grinning broadly at the camera.

"Today I am here with the CHL superstar, quoted 'wonderkid' by some, Cameron Beckett." Wow, she's very energetic in front of the camera. "Cameron plays for the St. Anne Lions." She gently tilts her head towards me. "Cameron, how is the season going so far?"

"It's going pretty well," I say, focusing on keeping eye contact with her even though I want to glance at the camera. "We've had some good games as well as some bad, but I think we're setting up a good foundation for the rest of the season."

Olivia nods understandingly. "Now, there have been some incidents of disagreements on the Lions. What's your take on this?"

Oh boy. "The team gets along well," I say slowly. "Tensions are high right now and everyone's pretty stressed, so, yeah, there have been a couple incidents. But overall we're a close team, um, and we always get past issues like these."

"I see. Let's talk Junior World Championships. Will you be representing Canada at the end of December?"

"Yes, I will," I say.

"And where is the tournament?"

"Finland." I bit my lip as she bobs her head again. The IIHF, or Junior World Championships, is a international tournament that happens right after Christmas. I'm excited for those couple weeks away from home.

"How exciting. So, there's been some talk that you'll be the first pick in the NHL draft." Olivia turns to the camera and laughs lightly like it's an inside joke. "How is that affecting your play?"

"It's not, really. At least, I'm not trying to let it."

"Just how much pressure is on your shoulders right now?"

I want to crack my knuckles I want to crack my knuckles I want to crack my knuckles. My heart is starting to pound. "I guess a lot."

Olivia laughs and placed a manicured hand on my leg, turning back to the camera. I glance at the camera too.

"Thanks so much for talking with us, Cameron," she says. "St. Anne is cheering for you and the rest of the Lions."

~

The radiator is making weird noises as I'm trying to sleep, curled up on top of my blankets. It's only six in the evening, but I'm tired. The interview left me exhausted, for some reason.

I twist on my back, my bedspring squeaking, and squint as light pours in from the crack in the curtains. I just want to sleep forever.

My door creaks open loudly. Hailey is bouncing in the doorway.

"I'm about to start a movie," she says, grinning. "Do you want to watch it with me?"

I sit up slowly and rub my forehead. "What movie?"

"Mary Poppins. Please watch it with me? It's my favorite movie ever. Please? Cameron! Do it!"

"Hailey, I'm tired. Will Veronica not watch it with you?"

"Veronica is out with..." Hailey sticks her tongue out and rolls her eyes back. " *Paul* ."

"What about Mom?"

"She went shopping. Please, Cameron!"

I sigh. "Okay, fine. But you have to make the popcorn."

"Yay!" She grabs my hand and pulls me out of bed and to the living room.

~

Half an hour later, Hailey and I are sharing a bowl of popcorn as Mary Poppins sings on the screen in front of us. Old VCR tapes are scattered on the carpet, and Hailey is humming off-key beside me.

There's a knock on the front door and Hailey groans dramatically.

"Relax, we don't have to pause it. I'll get it." I push the knit blanket off of me and hurry to the front door. "Oh! Hey, Sam."

"Hey," says Sam. He smiles shyly holds out a black umbrella. "I was just returning this, the one your mom let me borrow earlier."

"Oh! Thanks."

There's an awkward silence.

"Um -"

"Do -"

He blushes and shakes his head. "You go first."

"I was just going to say that Hailey and I are watching a movie, if you wanted to join."

Hailey gasps from the living room. "Sam's here?" she yells. "Sam!"

Sam laughs. "Maybe I will," he says. "What movie?"

"Mary Poppins," I say.

"Ooh, a classic."

"Yeah, it's a good one."

Another awkward silence. I step back and he walks through the front door, his arms folded in an oversized blue sweater.

"Hi, Sam!" says Hailey, completely turned around on the couch and not paying any attention to poor Mary.

"Hi, Hailey," says Sam.

"Sit beside me!"

"Okay." Sam moves to the couch, then stops and turns to face me. There are faint freckles on his nose that I haven't noticed before. "And I just wanted to say I'm sorry, if you heard what Trina said yesterday."

"Tr - oh, that's okay."

"I just... a C *is* really good."

"It's okay, it's not a big deal."

"And she shouldn't have said that."

"It's really okay."

"You worked hard for that C."

"It's okay, Sam. Honestly."

He looks sad. He takes a seat on the other side of Hailey. I sit down, too. Mary Poppins continues to sing and dance on the fuzzy screen.

8

I wake up to the sound of my alarm beeping loudly and rain pounding my window. Usually I'll walk to school, but today I think Veronica and I will drive.

In the kitchen, Veronica is simultaneously braiding Hailey's hair and eating a bowl of cereal. Hailey's face is stone and her jaw is locked, her arms crossed over her yellow raincoat. Veronica raises her eyebrows at me.

"'Morning," I say, pouring a bowl of cereal for myself. Mom is usually already at work by the time I wake up. "Hailey? What's wrong?"

Hailey continues to pout. "It's bring your dad to school day," says Veronica, her voice quiet and purposefully calm.

"It's called Donuts for Dad," says Hailey sharply. "And ouch! You're hurting my hair!"

"Oh," I say. "Hey, it's okay, Hails. Soon it'll be Muffins for Mom, right?"

"Whatever," snaps Hailey. Veronica ties Hailey's blonde hair with an elastic band and she marches to the front door to pull on her rain boots.

Veronica sighs and shrugs. "What do we do?"

"I don't know. Nothing?"

So we do nothing.

~

At school, Ethan, Luke, and Ollie won't shut up about the interview.

"It airs tonight," says Ollie, grinning. "I'll be watching it."

"Aw, my little boy, so popular now," says Ethan.

"Shut up," I mumble. The storm outside makes the cafeteria louder than normal, and I feel like pressing my hands against my ears. Instead, I pick at my sad chicken wrap.

"Will there be another classic Gonzalez-Beckett fight at the away game this weekend?" says Luke. His tone reeks of thinly veiled annoyance.

"Definitely not," I say. "Matthew and I... we're fine now."

"Hey, give Cameron a break," says Ollie, digging through a bag of potato chips. "It's Matthew that's the worst."

"Thank you, Ollie," I say.

"Yeah," Luke mutters. "But they both play a part."

"They're just too similar, is what I think," says Ethan. "They're both cocky, arrogant, sons-a-bitches -"

I flip him off and he laughs.

"Seriously though," he says. "You are alike."

"Maybe," I say.

Lightning strikes outside and illuminates the cafeteria, and a group of younger girls shriek loudly at another table. I turn and look in their direction, wincing.

"It's just lightning," says Ollie to himself. "No need to scream..."

I see Sam at the smart kids' table. He's sitting beside Trina, the girl from the other day, and they're going over homework or something together on her laptop. I notice they're sitting close to each other and I turn back around.

"Anyway," I say. "What was I saying? Oh yeah, Matthew. The away game will be fine."

~

The storm floods some of the roads, so practice is cancelled again today. I groan when I get the text message from Coach and sprawl out on my bed dramatically.

"More time to study," says Sam, who's sitting on my bedroom floor. "Have to get that B, right?" He's systematically organizing old tests and worksheets on the crooked hardwood.

"Sure," I say, rubbing my face.

Sam stops and looks up. "Is someone... crying?"

"Oh yeah, that's Hailey," I say. "It was Donuts for Dad or whatever at her school today."

"Oh," says Sam, looking out my bedroom door to the empty hallway. Her muffled sobs are echoing through the house. I don't know if Veronica and Mom are home or not, but everyone knows to leave her alone when she gets sad about this.

He turns back to look at me. "What happened? To your dad, I mean."

I shrug and pick at a thread on my quilt. "I dunno. I mean, my dad left us when my mom was pregnant with Hailey."

"Oh," says Sam, his voice quiet.

"Yeah. I mean, it's okay." It's kind of weird to talk about this. I don't say this to anyone. Not even Ethan.

"I'm sorry," says Sam. "That sucks."

I shrug again, and I can't stop scratching at the minuscule hole in my quilt. "Yeah," I say, and clear my throat. "It was kind of rough. I don't think he was that great of a guy. It's just that Hailey sees all the nice dads on TV and imagines him to be like that, you know?"

"That makes sense," says Sam.

"I mean, I don't really remember him. But my mom is cool, so..." I try to smile.

"When I was younger, I would have to bring my uncle to all the dad events," says Sam. "Even though he hated them. My parents died in a car accident when I was a baby."

"Oh. Shit."

"Yeah. Shit." Now Sam smiles. "It's okay. It's weird that we both lost a parent, or both."

"Yeah." I know what we're both thinking, though. No one that lives on this street is a perfect, complete family.

There's a weird mood in the room, the air so vulnerable I think it's going to shatter, the echo of our conversation suspended in the air. Like I said, I don't talk to anyone about this. Ever. Not Ethan, not Veronica.

Because the thing is, I do think about my dad sometimes. And of course I remember. Veronica and I were nine when he left. I just woke up one morning and he wasn't there. And he never came back. And there's a picture of the two of us in my desk drawer that I don't like to look at, and he's holding my hand and we're laughing, and I don't know. I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if he would have been proud of me. And other times I'm angry. If I met him now, I don't know what I'd do.

Sam's picking at the corner of a worksheet, and I'm picking at the quilt, and Hailey is crying.

"We don't have to study math right now," says Sam gently, breaking the silence. "Do you want to watch a movie?"

"Okay," I say. So we turn on the television in the living room and watch the old, black and white movie that's playing. Halfway through, Hailey joins us silently.

I just can't help but wonder if it would be better if my dad was dead. And I wonder what Sam's thinking.

We watch the movie.

9

Someone's nudging my shoulder. "Wake up dude, we're here."

I open my eyes, my neck all knotted up from sleeping on it funny. "Huh?" The bus rumbles to a stop and the doors hiss open, and I rub my face. "Oh."

Outside the window, a hotel is brightly lit against the afternoon sky. We just endured a seven hour bus ride to Mississauga to play the Steelheads tonight.

Ethan slaps my shoulder and stands up, pulling his duffel bag from the racks above the seats. "Hotel time!" he says. "Are we sharing a room?"

"Yeah, sure," I say sleepily. God, I really did sleep weird on my neck. I try to rub it out as we file off the bus and into the hotel. When weekend away games are far enough, we stay in a hotel for the night.

The hotel lobby isn't very busy, with just a few businesswomen talking on phones and a family with way too many kids. Our assistant coach, who we just call Jerry, checks us in and hands us keycards.

"You know the drill," says Coach, waving his personal key card around in the air. "Back in the lobby in two and a half hours. Be well rested and hydrated. No leaving the hotel. Do you hear me? We need this win tonight."

I could've sworn he glared at me and Matthew, but who knows for sure. There's a murmur of agreements before everyone bolts.

"Alright, so we're room 302," says Ethan as we're crammed into an elevator. I push the third button and wince as my neck cracks. "Let's rent a movie or something."

"Sounds good to me."

In front of room 302, Ethan slides the key card and it flashes green, and we head inside. A fairly clean bathroom, an ugly carpet, a flat screen TV, and

two beds with fluffy white pillows. A large window overlooks a parking lot.

I flop on the bed furthest away from the window, like always, and stretch out comfortably on the squishy mattress. I would never say this to my mom, but I like away games because I always sleep really well. The beds in hotels are always just so comfortable compared to mine at home.

Ethan sits on the edge of his bed, flipping through the channels on the television. "Horror movie? Or sentimental movie?"

I twist to get comfortable, burrowing my head in the pillow. I slept a bit on the bus, but that was cheap sleep. This is the real deal. "You pick," I say, my heavy eyelids beginning to shut.

Ethan grins. "I know you want the sentimental movie, you fucking romantic."

"Mm-kay."

"So gay."

And then I fall asleep, the faded scent of lemon cleaning supplies clinging to the pillow.

~

Two and a half hours later, I feel better. I chew on a granola bar as the team files back on the bus, charged with adrenaline and excitement. Ethan leads the team in cheers and chants, until five minutes later when we pull up to the Mississauga Arena, hollering and whooping.

As we're skating off the ice after warmups, the game minutes away from starting, Ethan finds my side.

"You know who texted me right before warmups?" he asks loudly over the noise of the stands.

"Who?"

"Lacy."

"Lacy? Am I supposed to know a Lacy?"

"Dude! Lacy! The girl I've been texting? The one I'm bio partners with?"

"Oh, that Lacy."

Ethan scoffs, but I know he's smiling. "Stop pretending like you know who Lacy is."

"No, I know who she is! Great girl. Great, great girl."

"Shut up."

I laugh.

"Well, what about you, Mr. Hot Shot?" Ethan says. "Do you have any lady friends you're sending special texts to before the games?"

"No."

"Oh, awkward!"

"I'm in love with hockey."

"Okay, loser."

I shove him, and he shoves me back laughing, as Coach calls us in a huddle. I chew on my mouthguard as my fingers start to tingle, and then the game starts.

We score fast. The Steelhead defensemen are slow. I fake out number 12 and scoop my puck around him, breaking free towards the net. As the goalie reacts, I snap my wrist and the puck goes sailing past his glove. Easy.

And I do it again. And again. Matthew scores one. Another forward named Julian scores one. I score another. Ethan is making amazing saves. And everything is perfect. You know? God, I love hockey.

When I'm on the ice, I feel like I know everything. I feel even smarter than Sam. I know every move the other team is thinking, I can tell where the defensemen are going, I know where the goalie is going to go, I feel like I can see everything on the court and it all makes sense. Everything clicks in my brain. It's like the perfect equation.

We win 6-2. God, I love hockey. We celebrate in the locker room. Matthew and I aren't even mad at each other tonight. Everything is sweat and laughter and dirty red and blue jerseys. Coach is happy.

I wish every game could be like this one.

~

Later that night, Ethan walks out of the bathroom in shorts and a sweatshirt, rubbing his damp hair with a towel. He's smiling at his phone.

"Lacy?" I ask. I showered before him. The other thing about hotel rooms - they never run out of hot water. And the soap always smells nice. At home, the bathroom is filled with women's shampoo and shaving cream and tampons and it always smells way too strong of flowers.

"Yeah," he says. He sits on the edge of his bed and texts her back, his thumbs flying across the screen. He laughs quietly at some inside joke and I turn back to my book, some obscure required reading for English class.

My phone dings on the nightstand and I reach for it. It's probably Veronica. Instead, it's Sam.

Hey! My uncle and I caught a few minutes of the Lions on tv. Great game :)

I don't know what to say, so I put the phone back down. Ethan glances up at me.

"A lady friend?"

"Veronica," I say.

"Hmm. Same diff."

"You weirdo," I say. I switch off the light and squeeze my eyes shut, the blue light from Ethan's phone illuminating the room. "'Night."

"'Night."

I fall asleep fast. I don't dream anything at all.

10

Sam comes over almost every day. Sometimes we study math. But usually we watch movies, or read through comics, or just sit in my room. Hailey plays with us, too.

It's nice, having him over. Ethan is my best friend, but we don't really hang out. I don't know. It's just different. Okay?

We're watching a movie on the couch, sharing a bowl of popcorn, when Mom groans loudly.

"Everyone be quiet!" she says, and Sam and I turn to look at her. She's leaning against the wall, cradling the wall phone on her shoulder and looping the cord around her finger. Yeah, I know, the old wall phone is outdated. But it still works, so why not?

Hailey comes sprinting out of her bedroom with two other girls, all laughing loudly. "We're hungry!" says Hailey.

"Shh!" hisses Mom, shooing Hailey and her friends away. "I'm on an important call - oh, hello? Yes?"

Hailey leans over the couch, her friends following her lead. "What are you watching?" asks Hailey loudly.

"A movie," I say. "Be quiet, Mom is on the phone. Go outside or something."

"It's too cold outside!" Hailey complains. She's right, though. We had our first snowfall a couple days ago.

"Go bother Veronica."

Veronica and Paul are sitting at the kitchen table, their hands intertwined. Veronica laughs at something he says and I try not to barf. That guy is the

worst.

Mom pushes the phone tighter against her ear and her mouth hardens in a tight, straight line. Everyone is so loud, I can barely hear the TV anymore. Honestly, this house is way too small for eight people to be crammed in the kitchen and living room.

Sam looks at me. "Do you want to get out of the house?"

"Sure."

~

The snow from a couple days ago has melted, but ice still lines the edges of the road. I stick my hands in the pocket of my coat, my boots crunching on frozen pebbles and my breath coming out in clouds.

"Where do you want to go?" says Sam. We're walking slowly down the empty sidewalk, bare trees shaking in the breeze.

"I don't care," I say.

"What's your favorite place in St. Anne?"

"The neighborhood rink."

"Let's go there. I haven't been there in forever."

"Okay."

~

George turns to us and grins broadly as we walk through the front door.

"Cameron!" he says, walking towards us quickly despite his limp. "Sam!"

I glance at Sam and smile. George never forgets anyone's name.

"Hi, George," Sam says. His cheeks are tinted pink from the cold, but I think he's blushing.

"I haven't seen you in years. You're much taller now!"

Sam laughs, and George pats Sam's arm. "I'm sorry, the ice is busy right now," George says apologetically. Over his shoulder, I can see there's an ice hockey lesson going on. Little boys that can't be older than four are stumbling around with tiny sticks and big helmets.

"That's okay," I say. "I don't have my skates anyway. We just wanted to walk over."

"Oh, perfect," says George. "By the way, the Lions are playing great! I'm cheering for you!"

"Thank you, George," I say. He beams.

Sam and I lean against the boards and watch the little kids fumble around on the rink, sometimes teetering over. A young woman I don't recognize is placing tiny orange cones around the ice. I rub my hands over my arms.

"That's what I did," I say. "When I was little. Played here, I mean." I can tell Sam is looking at me.

"You must've been good."

"I don't know. I don't think anyone is good when they're four."

We watch as a player swings his stick like a golf club and clips the edge of a puck, and Sam smiles. "Are you excited to leave?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Leave for the NHL. You could be playing in any city, right?"

"I guess I'm excited. I'm going to miss it here, though."

"Yeah."

I glance at Sam. He's watching the kids with bright eyes.

"Are *you* excited to leave?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says. "I think so." He looks at me and smiles softly.

It's not hard to imagine leaving St. Anne. The world is so much bigger than this small hockey town. But at the same time, it is hard.

"You know," says Sam. "I don't really invite people over, but would you want to? Come over to my house? My uncle is picking up Chinese for dinner."

"Okay," I say. All the time Sam's been over at my place, I've never been to his house.

~

It's even smaller than mine. And kind of messy. But his room is exactly as I imagined it. There are NASA posters and constellation maps hung on the walls, and books are spilling out of the crammed shelves. Papers and textbooks and pens are stacked neatly on his desk, and outside the front window, you can see the railroad tracks.

"I like your room," I say, picking up a thick book off the ground. " *War and Peace* . Any good?"

"It's alright," Sam says, smiling.

The front door opens and the smell of Chinese food immediately unfurls in the air. His uncle raises his eyebrows at me as I step out of Sam's room.

"Hello," says his uncle. He's wearing a button down shirt stained with grease, and his voice is as gruff as his weathered face.

"This is my friend Cameron," says Sam. "You know, the hockey player. Cameron, this is my uncle."

"You can call me Tom," says his uncle, and he shakes my hand.

"Nice to meet you," I say.

We eat in the living room, a hockey game on the television. Sam was right - Tom is a huge fan of hockey. He spills his rice when he stands up and hollers at the television. Sam and I look at each other and laugh.

Yeah, I don't do this with Ethan. It's just different. But it's nice. Okay?

11

I sigh tiredly as I slide my textbook into my locker and slam it shut. There's a girl standing right beside me, making me jump.

"Um, hi," I say, clicking the lock shut.

"Hi," she says cooly. It's Sam's friend - Trina, I think her name was. She has thick glasses and dark hair pulled back in a tight braid, and she's wearing a pink sweater that looks itchy.

"We need to talk," she says.

"Okay." To be honest, I'm a little scared of her. I feel like she's the type of person that would make someone cry for fun. But maybe I'm just being dramatic.

"You need to stop distracting Sam."

"What?"

"You heard me." She crosses her arms and raises her eyebrows. "I know you two have been friends lately, or whatever. But he hasn't been working as hard on his academics. So I think you should back off."

I frown. "I don't -"

"Listen, pretty boy." Pretty boy? "Sam would never admit this, but he's pretty much a genius. And he's missing the opportunities for scholarships because he's spending all his time with you."

"We're just - he's just tutoring me."

"Well, it's taking up a lot of time. Look, if you're really friends with him, you'll leave him alone for awhile and let him work. That's all I'm saying."

Trina shrugs and brushes past me, her flats clicking on the floor, and I'm left standing at my locker alone. I take a deep breath and head for the cafeteria.

~

My family starts to notice.

"It's been a few days since Sam has been over," says Mom casually one night, scrubbing a pot in the sink.

"He has to study more," I say. "You know, he's really smart. And I've been getting busier with hockey anyway."

"I want to play with Sam," says Hailey. She's sitting at the dinner table, swinging her legs, drawing a picture of something for homework.

"Yeah, well, you can play with him soon," I say. "Just drop it, okay?"

Mom raises her eyebrows and I go to my room. I can study math by myself. Besides, I get it. Sam needs to work on his stuff, not easy problems with me. I put on my headphones and flip through my math textbook, pretending to know what I'm doing.

We have our first snow day. Hailey runs to my bedroom and wakes me up, shouting in my ear. My family follows very strict protocols on snow days. First, Veronica makes everyone pancakes. For someone that likes cereal so much, she's a very good pancake maker. Then we all get dressed and make a snowman in the yard. Then we sit on the couch and watch a movie and Mom makes hot chocolate.

During the movie, Paul comes over. He shakes the snow off his coat in the front hall as Veronica kisses him.

"Gross!" says Hailey, who's leaning against me. We're sharing her favorite, fluffy pink blanket. "That's gross!"

"Shh," I say. "You're so loud. Drink your hot chocolate."

"But my marshmallows melted."

"Well, there's more in the kitchen."

"I don't want to get up."

"Then you don't get more marshmallows."

She pouts. "Life isn't fair."

"You got it." I glance over my shoulder at Paul and Veronica, who are moving into get-a-room territory. Does he really have to be here? It's a snow day, people.

Mom is looking at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Do you want to invite Sam over?" she says softly. I know what she's thinking. Paul is no Sam.

"Yeah!" says Hailey.

"Maybe later," I say. I haven't forgotten what Trina said. And I know she's right.

~

Even though school was cancelled, practice isn't, and I pick up Ethan like always. He shivers in the passenger seat, banging his hand against the air vents.

"Dumb car," he mutters.

"Hey!" I say. "Don't talk to her like that."

He laughs and rubs his gloved hands together. "Anyway, guess who I asked on a date?"

"Lacy?"

"Yup." He grins. "We're going to the movies this weekend."

"That's great."

"'That's great'? Dude, that's awesome! Have you seen her? She's so hot!"

"What movie are you seeing?"

"What - dude! You're asking the wrong questions."

"Sorry. What should I be asking?"

He squints at me. "Are you okay?"

"What? I'm fine!" He tries to stare me down, but I look over my shoulder as I merge lanes. Always check your blind spot, people.

"You seem like, mad."

"No, I'm not mad! I'm just tired. Lacy is great. Probably. Again, don't really know her."

"Are you sad?" Ethan grins and punches my shoulder. "Aw, are you sad about something, poor baby Cameron?"

"Shut up." I roll my eyes. "I'm just tired. Practice will be hard today."

"Yeah, okay. Blame it on practice."

"I'm serious. Coach got mad at us for goofing off yesterday."

"Uh huh." Ethan smirks like he knows all about me. Sometimes, I don't think he knows me at all.

~

I was right. Practice is hard. But I kind of like it. I don't feel like talking to anyone. I just want to shoot. Maybe I am mad about something.

12

I pick at my soggy chicken wrap as Ethan goes on and on about his date with Lacy. It's a surprisingly nice day outside, not too cold, and sunlight streams in through the windows.

I rub at my face and stand up. "I'm going to get a napkin," I say, needing an excuse to stretch my legs out. "Be right back."

The cafeteria stretches out in front of me, dozens of circular tables crammed with loud teenagers. I dodge wrappers and puddles on the ground as I make my way to the napkin dispenser on the wall.

Sam suddenly marches up to me. "Have you been avoiding me?" He sounds mad. He's wearing his Harvard sweatshirt.

I'm a little taken aback. "W-what? No!"

"Trina just told me what she said to you."

I open my mouth to say something but sigh instead. "I'm sorry -"

"No! Trina's my academic equivalent, not my friend. *You're* my friend. So can you please not walk out of my life without telling me?"

I've never seen him this mad before. I'm scared he's going to cry. His hands are in tight fists at his side.

"I'm sorry," I say again. "I just thought you needed time to work."

"I *like* spending time with you," he says. Students at nearby tables glance at us as his voice gets louder. "And your family, too. I can manage my own time."

"I know, I -"

"I thought you were avoiding me!"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Sam."

"Just..." He looks at me with a defeated face. Then he shakes his head and walks back to his lunch table.

I am the worst. I think I really am the worst. I can't focus the rest of the day and I bomb my math test.

~

Veronica and Hailey are sitting at the kitchen table, individually doing their homework. I flop down beside them and sigh.

"I am the worst," I say.

Hailey doesn't even look up from her work. "I know," she says, giggling.

Veronica puts her pen down and frowns. "What happened?" Currently my favorite sister.

"Sam hates me now."

Yeah, that makes Hailey look up. "No!"

"I mean, not *hate* hate me. Well, maybe. Well, probably not. I don't know. I just feel horrible. You know?"

"Bake him cookies," says Hailey. "When I'm mad at you and you bake me cookies, I feel better."

I frown. "When have I ever baked you cookies?"

"I'm just saying, in the future, you should."

"He'll be fine," says Veronica. "He's too nice to hate anyone."

I chew on my lip. "Maybe," I say. The doorbell rings and our eyes widen. "I'll get it."

It's Sam. His hands are in his sweatshirt pocket, and his breath is coming out in pale clouds. "Oh, hi," he says, like I'm the one that rang his doorbell. "Can... can I come in?"

"Of course." We go to my room, Hailey and Veronica's eyes following us, and I lean against the wall, prepared to unleash a long apology. "Sam -"

"It's okay," he says quickly. He pulls out my box of comics and sits on the ground, leafing through the pages. His eyes are sad, and he's biting his lip.

What is happening? "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," he says. "Can we just sit here? Not talk."

"Okay." So I sit beside him and we read old comics silently. I really don't know what's happening. I want to hug him. I read instead.

After awhile, Sam sets down the Wonder Woman comic he's reading. "You're my friend," he says suddenly. His eyes meet mine.

"You're my friend too," I say.

"Okay." He picks up the comic book again.

A voice from the hallway calls, "You're my friend, Sam!" Hailey is standing in the doorway, sucking on her thumb.

Sam laughs and I roll my eyes. "Hailey, stop sucking your thumb," I say. "And stop eavesdropping!"

"I'm not ea-ves-dropping." She walks over and sits beside Sam, crossing her legs. Sam begins to read the comic out loud, his lips curling into a smile.

I don't know. This feels okay. I think we're okay now.

13

I like Sam's taste in music. He plugs in his phone and soft, acoustic songs crackle out of the old speakers. Outside, yellow streetlights reflect off my dirty car windows.

Things have gone back to normal with him. The past week or so, I've been dropping him off at school on my way to pick up Ethan for practice. He's the leader of a new astronomy club or something, who knows.

Sam pulls the sleeves of his sweatshirt over his hands and looks out the window. Short mounds of muddy snow line the streets, and wet snowflakes drip on my window. I glance at Sam as a new song begins, his cheeks flushed from the cold.

"What song is this?" I ask.

"I don't know. Why?"

"I like it."

"I like it too."

Sam's view falls on the speakers. The song is kind of sad, but I like it. I really do. Why do people like things that make them sad?

Sam shivers and turns to the window. "Look!" he says. "Look at their Christmas lights."

I squint out the window as we drive past a house, strung up with blinding, colorful lights. "It's only November," I say. "Isn't that kind of early?"

"Maybe," Sam says. "My uncle and I don't decorate the house, usually."

"Really? Hailey would hate us if we didn't decorate."

"I'm not surprised."

"When we do decorate, you should come over."

"Yeah, maybe I will."

"Yeah, maybe you will."

My eyes are on the road, but I know he's smiling. I'm smiling too.

I drop Sam off at school and head to pick up Ethan. Ethan jumps in the car, immediately cranking up the 80s station, and shivers dramatically.

"Jesus, it's cold," Ethan says, rubbing his hands. "Oh, and can you send me your English notes from today?"

"Why? You were in class."

"Dude, you know I don't pay attention to Mr. Larner."

"Yeah, fine. Text me later and remind me."

"You're the best."

"I know."

Ethan yawns loudly and hums along to the song, and I glance sideways at him. On the days where I have Sam in the car before him, it feels weird when he gets in. I don't know. I think I'm just crazy.

~

It's a good practice day. We scrimmage and I continuously sink pucks in. That moment when your wrist snaps and the puck is flying through the air, and you hear the blood rushing in your ear and feel the sweat dripping down your jersey and the exhaustion in your bones, and the chaos of the rink around you slows to a hum, and the way you *know* the puck is going to go in... that's a good feeling. One of the best.

Ollie Johnson slaps my helmet as we take a water break. "Nice work today, Beckett."

"Thanks," I say, chewing on my mouthguard. Adrenaline is still racing through my veins. Who needs a water break? "You too."

Ollie shrugs modestly. "Anyway. Excited for the game tomorrow?"

"Of course." It's a home game against the Otters, one of our biggest rivals. I bet the arena will be almost packed. "You?"

Ollie grins. "I'm ready to crush them."

"'Atta boy," I say, laughing. I'm ready to crush them too, though. Playing against the Otters, especially at home, is one of the most fun games of the regular season. At least, if we win.

Coach blows his whistle and we toss out water bottles back on the bench. "Let's go," Ollie says. So we do. I can't help but notice Matthew is glaring at me the entire time.

~

When I step through the front door and dump my hockey bag on the ground, I hear someone crying in the kitchen.

Hailey immediately runs up to me and tugs my hand. She has a beaded headband on that's definitely Veronica's, and she's wearing her favorite fluffy socks. "Veronica's sad," she says in a loud whisper.

"Why?"

"Paul broke up with her."

"Oh, man."

"Can I tell you something?"

"Sure."

She beckons me down to her level, so I bend over and she whispers in my ear, "I never liked Paul anyway."

"Hailey!" I stand up.

"What? It's true!"

"Okay, but don't say that to Veronica."

"I won't!"

I toss my coat on the coat rack and head to the kitchen. Veronica is crying at the table, an untouched bowl of cereal in front of her and her phone in her hand.

"Hey," I say slowly. "Are you doing okay?"

Veronica rubs at her red eyes, her mascara smudging. Her hair is pulled back in a messy ponytail. "Paul broke up with me," she says. "Over *text* ."

I could honestly beat the shit out of Paul right now. "He's an asshole," I say. "Do you want me to beat the shit out of him?"

"Okay," says Veronica. "Actually, no, don't do that." She sniffs loudly, her bottom lip trembling, then collapses into another round of sobs. "I thought he was better than that!"

"I know. What do you want me to do? Is Mom home?"

"No, she's working late." Veronica takes a deep breath and glances at me, her big eyes shimmering with tears. "I'm hungry. And I don't want cereal. Can we go to AJ's?"

I look at the clock on the oven. It's almost ten at night. "Right now?"

"Yeah."

Mom will probably kill me. Actually, she'll definitely kill me. "Okay. Let's go. Hailey, put your coat on."

AJ's Diner, only a couple blocks away, has the best hamburgers in the entire universe. My dad would bring Veronica and I all the time when we were younger. Just stepping inside makes you happier.

The wind outside is biting cold, but we walk fast. As we turn the corner, the flashing OPEN sign hanging on the window greets us. Hailey runs to the front door, her boots crunch loudly on the ice, and Veronica and I follow quickly.

The place is small, with only a few tables. Black and white checkered tiles line the floor, and the red fabric of the booths are old and teared. The smell of fries hangs permanently in the air, and the bright fluorescent lighting hums quietly.

We take a seat at our booth and Veronica takes a shuddered breath. There's only one other couple here.

"I hate Paul," she says, dabbing at her eyes and blinking quickly. "You know? Like, such a jerk."

"Such a jerk," repeats Hailey, swinging her legs. "Cameron, can I get a milkshake?"

"He said things just 'weren't working out'," continues Veronica, quoting with air fingers. "Like, say it to my face. Anyone that breaks up over text is the worst."

"The worst," says Hailey.

"He was just so sweet too though, I don't understand!" Veronica puts her hands against her flushed cheeks. "I really liked him. But I hate him!"

"I know," I say. I don't really know how to respond to this. I've never been in a real relationship, to be honest. "He doesn't deserve you."

"I guess." Veronica sniffs as AJ sets down our usual tray with three juicy hamburgers and crispy fries.

The conversation ceases as we all dig in. God, these hamburgers really are the best in the universe. If these can't make you feel better, I don't know what can.

Veronica licks ketchup off her finger and smiles softly at me. "Thank you," she mouths.

I didn't really do much. But I do love my sisters. And I would beat the shit out of Paul.

14

I sprint down the ice, my heart pounding furiously, the puck pressed against my stick. An Otter player barrels towards me and I dodge around him. I can hear the roar of the stands engulfed around me, a sea of red and blue. I keep my eyes on the goalie.

The Otter player is back, the number 90 etched on his jersey. He's trying to press me against the boards as Luke opens up to my right. I pass the puck and break away towards the net, the goalie turned to face Luke. Luke passes back to me and I tip the puck in the net.

The fans go crazy as my teammates holler around me. I know I'm smiling. I chew on my mouthguard and glance at the stands.

I think Mom's at work, and Veronica has a babysitting job, but both Sam and Hailey are here, which is nice. I wonder where they're sitting. I wonder if they're proud of me.

During the first intermission in the locker room, Coach is maybe the happiest he's been all season. "That was great hockey," he says, waving his hand around to enunciate. "Just great. This is how we should always be playing. Craley, good saves."

I run a hand through my sweaty hair and nudge Ethan beside me on the bench.

"Thank you," Ethan says.

"And Beckett, way to get to the net. Watch that number 90, he likes to stick to you."

"I will," I say. Ethan glances at me and I flash him a grin. I'm almost jumpy with adrenaline.

Coach claps his hands. "Okay boys, let's keep this lead. Don't let them back in this game. Let's go."

The noise in the arena is even louder than it was before. Fans bang on the clear wall separating the ice from the stands as the ref drops the puck. I take off down the ice, breathing in the sweet smell of sweat and excitement.

Julian Rodge is scuffling for the puck against the boards with an Otters player. I open myself up, hoping he can get the puck to me. It clips against his stick and goes sailing down the ice, and I lunge for it.

I feel nauseous. I think I'm going to throw up. My helmet is pressed against the cold ice. Everything is spinning and my ankle really, really hurts. My hearing is muffled. I think the ref blows a whistle and I try to breathe.

"Beckett?" I feel nauseous. I blink my vision into focus and try to stand, gasping and biting down hard on my lip. I taste blood. My ankle hurts.

"Is it your ankle?" The trainer is bent over beside me, and I see number 90 guiltily skating towards the penalty box. He tripped me with his stick, that son of a -

"Can you stand?" The roar is the stands makes me wince. They're mad at 90. No, please, please, no. I cannot get hurt. I cannot get hurt. Everything is spinning.

"I think so." The words taste funny in my mouth. The trainer helps me stand. I don't put pressure on my right foot. Please no. I cannot get hurt.

My teammates are circling around the ice, giving me space, but watching me intently. The trainer helps me off the rink. I try to set my right foot down on the ground again but tears spring to my eyes. No! Please, no.

In the trainer's office, I sit on the desk with my leg outstretched as he unties my laces. He gives me a bottle of Gatorade, which helps with the nauseousness. My ankle is swollen. Very swollen.

The trainer looks up at me with a neutral face that I can't read and starts pressing against my ankle. "Does this hurt?"

I nearly scream, and instead squeeze my eyes and take a shuddered breath. "Um, yeah."

"How about here?" He slides his fingers down an inch.

"Y-yeah."

"Alright, we're going to ice this until the swelling goes down, okay?" The trainer scoops ice from a bucket into a plastic bag and gently tapes it around my ankle.

I wince against the cold. "When can I play? Can I go back out?"

"Not today, that's for sure." The trainer finishes taping my ankle.

"When? Soon?"

"I'm not sure -"

"What's wrong with my ankle? Is it broken? I have Worlds in just a little over a month."

The trainer frowns sympathetically and shrugs. "It seems like a sprain to me. You'll have to go to the hospital tomorrow and get it X-rayed."

"Okay." I take a deep breath and rub my face. How many minutes ago was I playing? Three? Four? I blink, taking in the dark room crammed with medical and training supplies, inspirational posters lining the walls. Just breathe, one of them says. Well, fuck that. I cannot get hurt. I *am* hurt. I want to beat the shit out of number 90.

"There's an extra pair of crutches in the hallway," says the trainer. "I'll be right back." Crutches? *Crutches?* No, no, no no no. I can't afford to get hurt now. My entire future depends on this season, everything that's happening right now, and I can't walk around on crutches and watch the rest of my

team play while I'm on the bench, I can't afford that, I need to play this season if I want a future at all and hockey is the only thing I can do!

The trainer walks back in, raising his eyebrows at my choppy breathing, and hands me a pair of crutches. They're metal and they look uncomfortable. I take them hesitantly.

"Listen to the doctors and you'll be okay in no time," says the trainer, smiling at me like we're best buds. "Sorry this had to happen."

I can't afford this. "Thanks for your help," I say.

~

I'm sitting on the bench in front of Coach, trying not to lose my shit.

"Hockey is a contact sport. People get hurt, it happens," says Coach, but his arms are crossed and he sounds pissed. Ethan told me he cursed out number 90 earlier. That dirty little shit. We ended up losing the game.

"I guess," I say.

"You're going to be fine. It doesn't seem too serious."

"I'll be fine in time for Worlds, right?"

Coach tugs at his tie and shrugs. "Whatever happens, happens."

"Not making me feel better, Coach."

He smiles sadly and shrugs again. "That's the sport. Get lots of rest, listen to your doctors, and you'll be back in no time."

I rub at my face and stifle a groan. "Okay, Coach." Jesus, my ankle hurts.

What am I supposed to do now?

15

Sam comes over a lot. It still hurts to walk around, so I just stay in bed or on the couch with my foot raised, and he sits beside me.

He's been bringing over movies and books and stuff. Not that I like books that much, but I've tried one or two, and they're okay. I told him no *War and Peace* and he laughed.

Today, he brought over a black and white movie.

"I'm sorry, but old movies are boring," I say, shifting to get comfortable on the itchy couch. I wince as I accidentally flex my ankle. "They last forever."

"They're *not* boring," says Sam, already sliding the tape into the old VCR. Outside, the wind is howling and snow is slamming against the window. We had another snow day today. I'm glad the fireplace is on.

"What's not boring?" asks Hailey, running from her room with her stuffed giraffe in hand. "What are you watching?"

"A classic," says Sam. "Want to watch?"

"Okay." She sits between Sam and I and pats my hand. I know she feels bad. Sam told me she freaked out when I fell on the ice. "Does your ankle still hurt?"

"Yeah," I say. "It only happened a couple days ago."

"Ouch," says Hailey.

"Yeah, ouch."

Hailey tucks her hair behind her ears and twists around. "Hey, Mum?"

Mom is stirring a pot of soup on the stove. I can smell the spices from here. "Yeah?"

"I'm watching a classic movie."

"Good for you, honey."

"Thank you." Hailey turns back around and beams at Sam. She sets her giraffe on her lap and wraps her arms around it as Sam presses play.

I stifle a sigh and blink quickly, trying to wake myself up as the movie starts. We went to the doctors yesterday, and it's officially sprained. At least three weeks before I can play again, and that's if I'm lucky and it heals fast. Sitting around the house is hard. And I just feel so mad all the time. I'm not trying to be.

The opening credits roll dramatically, and then the movie begins, something about Morocco. I glance sideways at Sam and Hailey, who are watching the fuzzy screen with rapt attention. Sam is wearing his green sweatshirt. I think it's his favorite. He wears it all the time.

After half an hour, Hailey goes back to her bedroom, claiming she needs to sleep. I don't blame her. I feel myself drifting off too.

Sam looks at me. "Are you falling asleep?"

"No."

He smiles. "It's okay. We can pause it."

"No!"

His eyes freeze on me, big and blue.

"I don't want to pause it, I want to finish it!" I don't know why I sound so angry.

"Okay," says Sam slowly. "Do you want to... talk?"

"No," I snap. I'm glad Mom's not in the kitchen anymore, or she would beat my ass. "I want to play hockey, okay, Sam? But I can't do that right now. So I have to finish this movie. Okay?"

"Okay," says Sam. The only sound is the wind banging against the windowpanes, and I bit my lip. "I can go home, if -"

"No."

"Okay."

He looks at me for another second, twisting his mouth, then hits play on the remote. I feel horrible. But I also feel trapped in this house.

~

After the movie ends, we go to my room as we wait for dinner to be ready. I have to hobble over on those goddamn crutches.

"So, did you like it?" says Sam, sitting on the ground and leaning against the dresser.

"It was okay," I say, trying not to wince as I sit on my bed and press an ice pack against my ankle. Actually, I did like it. More than I thought I would.

Sam pulls out a comic from the box and flips through it mindlessly. "I haven't read this one before," he says lightly. "You know, your collection is probably worth a bit -"

"I'm sorry."

He looks up. "It's okay," he says.

"It's just that everything's riding on this season." I rub my forehead. "And I'm not playing in it."

"I know," says Sam. "You'll play again. The maximum out time for a sprained ankle is what, two months?"

"That's after Worlds Juniors."

"I know, but -"

"Everyone is watching me, Sam! The NHL is watching me!"

His eyes turn sad, and I blink away. I hate that. I hate when he gets sad.

"You'll play again," he says softly.

"I know." I sigh and crack my knuckles, the radiator humming against the wall, and Sam runs a hand over the cover of the comic book. The silence hurts.

Finally, Sam clears his throat and smiles. "So, have you read *War and Peace* yet?"

"Shut up." But I smile, too.

~

During dinner, the conversation is focused on Hailey's upcoming birthday.

"So, what are you asking for, Hailey?" asks Sam, glancing at me briefly. I can tell he's trying to keep things lighthearted.

Hailey swings her legs, scattering cracker crumbs in her bowl of soup. "I want a horse."

"You're not getting a horse," says Mom, blowing on her steaming spoon.

Hailey sighs dramatically. "Okay, then I want a cat."

"Wouldn't you rather have a dog?" asks Veronica. "You can't play fetch with a cat."

"No, I want a cat."

I smile. "I like cats, Hailey."

"Thank you, Cameron." She sighs and turns back to Sam. "Anyway, I also want the Barbie Fabulous Summer Dreamhouse. It comes with a pool and furniture. Not the car, though. You have to buy the Fabulous Summer Car separately. It's pink."

"That sounds fun," says Sam.

"It is. I also want a cell phone."

"You are *not* getting a phone," says Mom.

"Okay, then I want a bike."

Mom takes a bite of her soup and raises her eyebrows.

"A green one." Hailey smiles.

~

The sprained ankle makes falling asleep hard. I stay up nearly half the night, trying to get comfortable with one leg under the comforter and one leg resting on pillows. The wind howls against the thin walls and I squeeze my eyes shut. Sometimes, sleep doesn't come when you want it to.

My phone vibrates and I twist over, grabbing it from the nightstand. The blue light illuminates my small room, shadows curling on the walls. It's from Ethan.

how's the ankle? just wondering if you were still able to drive me to practice, i forgot which foot you sprained. see you at school if the storm stops

I start to text back, then delete my message and set my phone down. No, it's my right foot, so I can't drive. I just don't feel like talking. Even if it's words on a screen.

I sigh, blinking up at the Maple Leafs poster on the ceiling, as the wind howls and howls and howls.

16

These goddamn crutches. My boot is heavy, my crutches are long and awkward, and the school hallways are way too crowded for an injured person to maneuver through.

Even worse than the crowded hallways, since the school is three stories high, I have to take the elevator. The school elevator is old and musty with pale fluorescent lighting, and my stomach twists every time it shudders to a start.

I lean against the shiny, metallic wall and press the third floor button. As the doors start to slide shut, someone sticks a hand in the elevator and the doors reopen.

"Sam, we have to study during lunch." Trina is standing in the hallway, her glossy lips twisted in an annoyed frown.

"Okay, see you then," says Sam, and steps inside the elevator, grinning. His cheeks are flushed. "Hey!" he says happily. "Care for company?"

"Sure," I say, adjusting my crutches. The elevator jerks to an ascent and my grip tightens on the rubber handles.

"I wanted to ask you about Hailey's gift," Sam says, sticking his hands in his sweatshirt pocket. "For her birthday. I was at the store and they have really good telescopes for sale. Do you think she'd like one?"

"Honestly, I think she'd love anything you gave her."

"Okay!" Sam's grin broadens. The freckles on his nose are more noticeable in the bright elevator lighting. "Also, I'm sorry, but I can't tutor you the rest of this week. I have astronomy club, and then an award ceremony thing. But I'll see you at Hailey's party, obviously."

"Award ceremony?"

"Yeah, it's not a big deal."

The elevator doors slide open to the third floor and I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

"What class do you have?" I ask, stepping out into the hallway. Students are slamming their lockers and talking loudly, sneakers scuffing against the waxy linoleum floor.

"Calculus."

"You're in calculus?"

"No, I took it a couple years ago. I'm the teacher's assistant."

"Of course."

Sam smiles. "I'll see you later."

"Yeah, see you."

He disappears into the crowd, and I start walking at a painfully slow speed in the opposite direction. The flow of traffic parts for me, even though once in awhile someone will clip their shoe against the edge of my crutch.

"Hey, dude!"

I glance over my shoulder. "Hey, Ethan."

"You look unusually happy right now."

"Do I?"

My eyes register the Lions sweatshirt he's wearing and a little part of me snaps. If I was smiling, I'm not anymore. I clear my throat.

Ethan falls in line with my slow pace as he flips through his math notebook. "Shit," he mutters. "What was the homework?"

"I don't know, the worksheet she gave us?"

"Shit! Can I say I left it on my desk?"

"You might've used that line one time too many."

Ethan groans as we head into our classroom. If there's one positive thing that came out of my sprained ankle, it's that Mrs. Gobfrey has been nice to me.

~

Hailey's birthday is on Sunday, so we go to church on Saturday. Since my hockey career is temporarily over (Sam says that sounds dramatic, but technically I think it's true) I don't have an excuse to skip church anymore.

It's almost too cold outside to walk, but of course, we do. Even if there's a blizzard, Mom always has a way to justify walking to church. Even when I'm in crutches. That woman will be the death of me.

Instead of taking my hand as we cross the street, Hailey grabs hold of my coat. I shiver and wiggle my fingers in my wool mitts, iciness nearly radiating from my skin. I push my hat lower over my ears and squint at the cathedral on the corner.

A wave of warmth washes over us as we step inside and kick the snow off our boots. An empty hymn is echoing throughout the airy room, and flickering candles line the walls. Dark light filters in through the stained glass windows, and the thick smell of smoke hangs in the air.

We take our seat in our regular pew, my crutches resting at my feet. Immediately, Mom fingers the rosary on her neck and her eyes flutter shut, her lips moving silently.

"Pray, Cameron," she whispers suddenly. Why does she always say that? She can't even see me. "Pray for your ankle to heal quickly."

Before I can answer, the priest clears his throat by the altar and everyone sits up straighter. His croaky, monotone voice can lull someone to sleep, I

swear.

I don't mean to zone out, but it just happens. I like it when everyone stands and sings, though, because it's fun to watch Hailey. I open the song book to the page number and tilt it so she can read, and she belts the lyrics louder than anyone else here.

"Stop fidgeting," Mom whispers. I sit on my hands. The Lions lost again last night. Every game they lose and I don't play, the Cup and the NHL first-draft pick slip further and further away.

Maybe I should pray about my ankle. But I don't. The mass ends.

As we walk home, our breath crystalizing in the freezing air, thunder rumbles in the distance. Hailey's grip tightens on my hand.

"Cameron!" she says. "Will it rain on my birthday?"

"Maybe," I say. Her jaw drops dramatically. "What? The party is inside anyway."

"I know," she says, kicking a frozen pebble down the icy sidewalk. "I just like it when it's sunny on my birthday."

"Well, we'll have to see." I glance down at my little sister, her tangled blonde hair spilling out from underneath her hat. "Your birthday will be fun either way. Seven years old, that's an important one."

"Yeah," she says. Then she smiles up at me. "I'm excited for cake."

"Cake? Is that all?"

"Yes. Is it vanilla cake with chocolate icing? Because that's my favorite kind."

"You'll just have to wait," I say.

"Cameron!" She laughs and tugs my hand. "Tell me!"

I smile. "No way."

Maybe I do pray, a little. For sun.

17

Girls start arriving at the house after lunch. They dump their coats and rain boots and umbrellas by the front door and start squealing immediately, hugging Hailey. Veronica and I lean against the couch, taking the gifts.

I think Hailey invited five girls, but the only one I know by name is Annabelle. Mom set up a few party games earlier, so they all crowd around in the living room.

"I'm going to go finish the cake," says Veronica, tucking her hair behind her ears. "What color should I ice it? Pink?"

"Sure," I say. Like I care what color icing is on the cake.

The doorbell rings and I swing it open. It's Sam.

"Hey!" he says, smiling. He shakes the water from his umbrella and steps inside, a gift-wrapped box under his arm. "Sorry I'm a bit late."

"That's okay," I say, shutting the door before a gust of wind blows rain inside. Hailey didn't get her wish for sun.

"The decorations look good," he says, glancing around.

"Thanks." To be honest, I'm pretty proud of them. It's not like I've had anything else to do lately. Colorful streamers line the ceiling, sparkly balloons are tied to the backs of chairs, and confetti is scattered on the ground. Okay, maybe the confetti was a bit much.

"Sam!" Hailey jumps up from the sofa and runs to give him a hug. She's wearing a pink tutu and a blue sweatshirt that Mom let her pick out this morning, and a glittery birthday hat on her head.

"Happy birthday, Hailey!" Sam says. "Are you seven?"

"Yeah!"

"Now you're only ten years younger than me."

Hailey beams. I take Sam's gift and put it on the kitchen table with the others, and Hailey drags him to the living room.

"This is Sam," Hailey announces to the other girls, standing in front of the crackling fireplace. "He's my friend."

"Hi!" Sam blushes.

I join Veronica at the counter as she's spreading a thick layer of pink icing over a vanilla cake. It's too crowded in the living room to move around with my crutches. "Looks good," I say, swiping the icing with my finger.

"Cameron!" She smacks my hand away. "Don't do that."

"What are you going to write on it?"

"I don't know, maybe happy birthday?"

I laugh. "Geez, just asking."

"Yeah, asking the dumb questions." She licks the last of the icing off the butter knife and points it at me. "Didn't Mom ask you to order the pizza?"

"I don't know, did she?"

Veronica nods, so I grab the cord phone and dial the local pizza place. As the monotone ring goes off in my ear, I smile as Mom puts on a song and the girls start dancing. Sam spins Hailey around.

"Hi, welcome to Papa's Pizza, what can I get for you?"

"What? Oh, hi, sorry. Can I get three large cheese pizzas?"

After the dance party ends, the girls start a game of truth or dare that Sam fortunately gets out of. He, Veronica, and I sit at the table and watch Mom

try to control the group.

"I broke my finger playing truth or dare once," says Sam, fingering the edge of the tablecloth. "I was dared to climb a tree, and the branch broke."

Veronica laughs. "That wasn't very smart."

"No, it wasn't." He smiles and looks at me. I think I smile too. Everything feels good, right now. The party, the laughter of Hailey and her friends, the sweet scent of cake batter, even the rain dripping down the window. There's a knock on the door and I clear my throat.

"I'll get it," I say, grabbing my crutches and heading for the door. I've gotten faster on them.

It's the pizza man. I pay with cash and balance the hot boxes in one hand, the warm dough smelling delicious.

Mom, who's sitting on the couch, glances at me. "Pizza is here!" she says, clapping her hands. "Let's eat."

And so we do. Hailey opens up her gifts - a set of nail polish, a book, a Barbie doll, and a skipping rope. From Mom, she gets the Barbie Summer Dreamhouse or whatever that she wanted. It's obvious that she likes Sam's gift the best, though.

When she rips it open, she looks up at Sam in awe. "A telescope?"

"Yeah," says Sam, sitting on the arm of my chair. "On a nice night, I can teach you how to use it."

"Wow," breathes Hailey. She runs her hand over the box gently. "I love it."

I know Sam is smiling. She runs up and hugs him.

By the evening, Hailey's friends have been picked up, and the rest of us are sprawled out in the living room, the fire in the fireplace lazily dying out. Veronica is painting Hailey's nails blue with a new nail polish bottle she got.

"Did you have a fun birthday?" asks Veronica. I sigh tiredly and rest my head against the couch pillow, my boot resting on the coffee table.

"Yeah," says Hailey. "Jackie forgot to bring me a card, but she says she's going to give me one at school tomorrow."

"Well, that's nice."

Sam stretches beside me, pulling the sleeves of his sweatshirt over his hands. He always does that. "Jackie was the one with red hair?"

"Yeah," says Hailey. "Don't tell her I told you, but she has a crush on you."

Sam's cheeks go pink and he smiles. "Okay," he says. "I won't tell her you told me."

~

After awhile, Hailey goes to her room to play with her new Barbies, and Mom and Veronica run out to the grocery store. Sam and I start a black and white movie. I should be doing homework for tomorrow, but whatever.

I'm close to dozing off when Hailey walks back into the living room. "Hey, Cameron?" she asks.

I wince and rub my face. "Yeah?"

"Do you think my dad will call me?"

Even though the movie is still playing quietly, everything seems to go silent. "Why?" I ask, glancing at Sam.

"I don't know. It's my birthday."

Shit. Where are Mom and Veronica when you need them?

I clear my throat. "Um, I don't..." I shoot Sam a look.

"Well, maybe, Hailey," says Sam. "But maybe not."

Hailey shrugs, digging her toe into the floor. "I was just wondering." But I know she's sad.

"I'm sure he's hoping you have a wonderful birthday," Sam says. "Even if he doesn't call. Right?"

"Yeah," says Hailey slowly.

"Besides, you have a big family here that loves you and wishes you a happy birthday." Sam looks at me.

"Right," I say, finally finding my voice. "We all love you. And wish you a happy birthday."

"Can I watch the movie with you guys?"

"Of course."

She sits between Sam and I and rests her head against my shoulder. I wrap my arm around her when she starts to sniff. Sam and I exchange a look over her head.

"Thank you," I mouth silently.

I'm glad he's here.

18

I groan as I scratch out my work. "Shit, I just did this wrong."

Sam's leaning against the dresser, typing something on his laptop. He squints up at me. "Did you forget the negative sign?"

"Um..." I tap my pencil against my head and scan through the numbers. "Oh, yeah, I did." I don't bother asking anymore how he knows every single time.

I erase the problem in my notebook as I glance out the window. The bare trees are shaking in the wind, and the sky is a cloudless grey-blue. A woman wearing a heavy coat walks her dog beside the train tracks.

I turn back to my notebook. "Okay, so sixteen is actually a negative sixteen. So I plug in the negative sixteen here and bring over the..." My eyes flicker up at Sam. He's looking at me. "What?"

"Can I tell you something?" His hands are frozen on his keyboard.

"Sure."

"I think I'm gay."

His eyes are very, very blue. "Oh," I say.

"Are you - is that okay?"

"Of course."

"Okay." Sam smiles softly. "Are you sure it's okay? You look a little scared."

"No, of course it's okay," I say, trying to smile back, but I am scared.

Henry. Henry. Henry. Henry. Henry. Henry Henry Henry Henry Henry.

"Okay," Sam says again.

"Have you -" I clear my throat. "Have you told anyone else yet?"

"I told my uncle. He doesn't really care. I guess I'll tell Trina and my other friends at school. Maybe just let your family know? It's not that big of a deal, I just... I don't know."

"Okay," I say.

"Okay," he says.

"How long have you known?"

"I don't know." Sam picks at a thread in his sweatshirt and thinks about it. "I guess awhile?"

"Oh," I say.

He smiles. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, just a little surprised, that's all."

"I'm sorry. I hope this doesn't change anything between us."

"Sorry for what? Don't be dumb, of course not."

"Okay."

I chew on the eraser of my pencil and try to focus again on my math homework. My heart is pounding like crazy.

Crying ninth grader with a bloody nose.

The thick scent of smoke at church.

You little shit.

Sam with a bloody nose.

The thick scent of smoke and the sound of the rain, and the color of blood on linoleum floor.

I press the tip of my pencil too hard against the paper, and the lead snaps.

Sam sighs and stretches. "Anyway, I should get going."

"Okay."

He stands up and slides his laptop into his backpack, looking up at me. "Cameron, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. Just, if anyone gives you trouble about it, come tell me, okay?"

Sam laughs. "Cameron, I'll be fine. But thank you. You're a good friend."

The color of blood. I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't know why I feel this way.

~

Mom is chopping red peppers, the sharp scent of spices making my nose tingle. I sit at the kitchen table beside Veronica. There's a cross hanging above the window. I clear my throat.

"So, Sam is gay," I say.

Mom stops chopping. Veronica glances up briefly.

"Okay," says Veronica.

"Oh," says Mom.

"If you wanted to know." My stomach twists. "Is that okay, Mom?"

"Oh," Mom says again. "Well, that's fine. I mean, Sam is like family."

"Of course he is," says Veronica.

"I may not always understand it, but I'm certainly not against it." Mom resumes chopping her peppers.

I feel dizzy, and I rub my head. "Yeah," I say.

Mom pops a slice of pepper in her mouth. "Should you two be alone together?"

"Mom, I'm - we're not - *I'm* not gay."

She raises her eyebrows. I didn't mean to sound so angry. Maybe I am angry.

"Okay," she says.

Veronica turns a page in her book and glances up at me. "Don't look so stressed, Cameron."

"I'm not stressed. Where's Hailey?"

"At Annabelle's," Mom says.

"Okay," I say. "When's my doctor's appointment?"

"Tomorrow."

"Okay." I crack my knuckles. "Well, I'm going to go finish my homework."

I know they're both watching me as I walk out of the kitchen on my crutches. With my good leg, I press my bedroom door shut behind me.

I think I'm just tired. I stare at the poster on my ceiling.

19

Since it's officially December, Sam comes over one Saturday morning and we decorate the house. No one mentions him being gay. Maybe he was right. Maybe it isn't a big deal.

Hailey holds up a ball of tangled lights, a pink knit hat pulled low over her ears. "Let's put the lights up!" she says, her breath clouding in the chilly air. It's a surprisingly nice day; only a few patches of ice and muddy snow are piled on the sidewalks, and the sky is a soft shade of blue.

"How about this?" asks Sam, pulling a light-up candy cane out of a box that's almost as tall as Hailey. His cheeks are flushed from the cold, and his scarf muffles his words a bit. "Where should we stick this? By the mailbox?"

I rub my gloved hands together and lean against the house, resting on my crutch. Mom told me I should stay inside and rest, but I can't miss decorating day.

Veronica sighs dramatically, digging through one of the cardboard boxes. "So many lights."

"The brighter a house is, the easier it is for Santa to find," says Sam. My dad used to say that too. I stick my hands in my coat pockets.

Sam begins untangling the rope of lights, humming a Christmas carol, and Hailey joins in singing loudly. Reluctantly, Veronica's lips curl into a smile and she's singing along too. Even Mom joins in, with her voice that she claims could've made her a star. Everyone's laughing.

I'm laughing too.

I guess this is nice, all of us decorating together.

~

Later that afternoon, when all the lights are strung up and the light-up candy cane is planted in the frozen grass, Mom and I go to the doctors.

She glances sideways at me from the driver's seat, her hands stiff on the wheels. "Is your foot feeling better?" she asks. She doesn't like music when she drives, so the car is silent except for the guttural hum of the engine.

"I guess," I say. "I mean, yeah." I run a hand over my thick boot. I would kill to take this off.

The clinic is cold and bare, the faded yellow wallpaper chipping. A few patients are scattered around, tiredly flipping through outdated magazines.

I take a seat in the corner, resting my crutches against the wall, as Mom signs in with the receptionist.

I don't know if I'm that religious. But you better believe that I'm wishing to whatever's out there that this foot can play hockey again.

"Stop fidgeting," whispers Mom as she takes a seat beside me, setting her purse on her lap.

"I'm not fidgeting."

"You're cracking your knuckles again."

I hold back a sigh and sit on my hands.

"Are you that Beckett boy?" Mom jumps as an old man sitting on the wall opposite of us points at me, his voice raspy and croaky. "You play hockey."

I smile. "Yes, sir."

"I've seen you on my television!" The man barks out what must be a laugh and slaps his knee, his hands withered. "You're a good player, young man."

"Thank you very much," I say. "I'm hoping to be playing again soon."

"Yes, yes," he mutters, nodding his head like he's lost in thought. "Very good. Representing the city, our country, nice young man, very good."

What am I supposed to say? "Yes, sir," I say again, keeping the smile on my face. I'm slightly relieved when the nurse calls my name.

It's weird when people recognize me. But soon there'll be a lot more.

The doctor is an older woman with short, greying hair and a tight-lipped smile. I wince only a little as she rubs my ankle, then asks me questions, then makes me do some activities around the room; stretching my foot, turning it, standing on it.

"Hmm," she says quietly, looking through my folder.

My heart drops. "What?"

She pressed her fingers to her mouth. "Everything looks... good," she says, her tone surprised.

"Oh," I say. "How good?"

Seconds tick by on the clock. This woman sure loves to dangle her patients, doesn't see? "I don't think you need to wear the boot any longer," she says.

"And hockey?"

"You still need to take it easy, start slow on the ice. I'd give it a week before you try anything. It'll be sore, and you need to ice it daily. But everything seems to have healed nicely."

"So I can play at World Juniors?"

The doctor squints. "That's in what, a couple weeks?"

"Yes."

Another pause. "Yes, you should be fine. But like I said, you'll need to ice it often."

I'm about to pass out with relief. "Wow, thank you," I say. I could cry. Mom is smiling. The sun is shining! I'll play at World Juniors! I'll play hockey! And not everything is so bad.

~

When I show up to practice, Coach basically grabs me in a bear hug.

"Good to have you back!" he says gruffly, slapping my shoulder.

"Good to be back," I say. I forgot how much I missed Parkway Arena. The colorful advertisements on the boards, the sea of seats, and the clean, white ice. My second home.

I wanted to play today, but Mom isn't letting me yet. She's sucking up to the doctor. Well, whatever. At least I drove here, in running shoes, to watch my teammates practice. I forgot what it felt like to wear sneakers on my right foot. Apparently, you forget a lot of things when your foot is stuck in a boot for weeks.

As the team starts to scrimmage, Coach turns to me. "So, World Juniors. You'll be able to play?"

"Yes."

A smile spreads across his face. "Good. I already registered you, anyway. When will you be able to practice again?"

"The doctor said a week, but my ankle honestly feels fine. Probably sooner."

Coach points his clipboard at me. "Listen to your doctors."

But I know what he's thinking. The sooner I practice, the more prepared I'll be for Worlds, the better I'll play, the higher chance at winning the tournament, the more secure my NHL spot will be.

At least, that's what I'm thinking.

Matthew fumbles the puck and a defender swoops in and steels it, and I hear coach mutter something under his breath beside me. My fingers start to tingle and I sit on them. I'll play. I'll play. I'll play.

And not everything is so bad.

A/N Hey readers, thank you guys so so much!!! Every vote and comment means so much to me, and I hope you're liking Cameron and Sam's story as much as I am! :)

I' m currently out of town so I won't be able to update AS often, but I'll try and sneak in a few updates while I'm away! D on't worry, I have lots of goods planned, so make sure to stick around!! ;)

- M

20

I wake up early in the morning in a cold sweat, my heart pounding furiously. The alarm clock on my shelf reads just past five o'clock, the red light reflecting against the walls. The sky outside is still dark. I guess I had a bad dream. I don't remember.

I throw on a sweatshirt and wander into the kitchen. Everything is quiet except for the faint rattling of the radiator, and odd shadows are thrown around the house. I'm usually never up this early. School doesn't start for another three hours.

I pour myself a bowl of cereal, wincing at the loud crunch, and flex my ankle as I eat. It's sore, like the doctor said, and it still swells up, but it feels good to walk on it. I realized I forgot to turn on the kitchen light, and when I stand up to flip the switch, I have a fucking heart attack as I glance at the window.

"Jesus, Sam!" I whisper loudly, opening the front door. A gust of frigid air blows in and I shiver. "Why are you standing out here? I saw you through the window and almost lost my shit."

Sam is standing on the doorstep with his hands in his pockets and snow on his coat shoulders. Thick, lumpy snowflakes are lazily drifting down from the dark sky, illuminating in the yellow light of the street lamps.

"I was about to knock," Sam says. "Or text you. I didn't think you'd be awake."

I shiver and lean against the door. "I woke up early and couldn't sleep. What are you doing here? It's like, five in the morning. Do you want to come inside?" He looks at his boots, caked in snow, and doesn't say anything. "...Are you okay?"

"I have to go to the cemetery."

"Oh. Okay."

"Do you want to come with me?" He glances up for the first time since I opened the door. There are snowflakes on his eyelashes and cheeks.

"Oh."

"You don't have to. I don't -"

"No, I will," I say. "Just let me get my coat. Wait inside."

Sam steps inside the front hallway, drifting in snow, and I run to my room to grab a coat and boots and hat and gloves. I hurriedly pull everything on as I scrawl out a note on the kitchen counter, saying I had to get something early for school. I don't know, okay? I feel very rushed and a little panicked because something is happening and I'm not really sure what's going on.

We walk down the street, my boots sinking in the shallow layer of snow. I blink snowflakes out of my eyes and glance at Sam, our breaths clouding in the air. The street is empty except for us, and everything is so quiet and dark, it's like we stepped into a photograph. It's a little eerie. I don't know if I should say anything, so I don't.

When we reach the church, we turn the corner instead of walking through the front doors like I would usually do. I'm not sure if I've ever really been in the cemetery, besides just driving by. It's kind of small and cramped, pushed in a yard in the back of the church. Sam knows where to go, so I follow him.

"Here," he says. It's the first time he's said anything in awhile and it makes me jump a little. Then I realize we're standing in front of two tombstones, caked with ice.

"Oh," I say. The death date on both was exactly fifteen years ago. "I'm sorry, Sam."

He stays quiet for a really long time, so I do, too.

Catherine and Will. Those were his parents' names, and they're etched in the grey stone now. I remember Sam said they died in a car accident. I wonder if he was in the car. He never told me.

Sam starts to shiver beside me, and I wonder if he's going to cry. I wouldn't know what to do.

"Are you going to cry?" My whisper carries across the empty cemetery.

The corner of his mouth raises. "No, I'm not going to cry," he says. "Thanks for asking."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. It was a long time ago. I don't really remember them. I just always come out on the anniversary of their death."

"By yourself?"

"Until now."

"Oh." My eyes follow a snowflake until it sticks to the ground. "How long were you waiting at the front door?"

He pauses. "I guess awhile."

"I would've come, you know."

"I know. That's why you're here. It just felt weird to ask."

I scrunch my hands in my coat pockets and try not to tremble. Jesus, it's cold. Sam's cheeks and nose are pink under the yellow streetlight. I wait for him to talk first.

He finally does, pulling his hat lower over his ears. "Should we go?"

"Right now? Is that it?"

"What else are we supposed to do?"

"I don't know, say a prayer or something? I don't know how these things are supposed to work."

"Me neither. I just talk to them in my head. Do you think that's enough?"

He looks at me like I'm the expert on these things, traces of worry pooling in his eyes.

"Yeah, Sam, I think that's enough," I say.

So we leave the cemetery, leaving behind two pairs of footprints. I nudge his arm as we pass by the front of the church. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," he says.

I don't know if he's telling the truth. The shadow of the church steeple twists on the road, and the snow starts to fall heavily. My fingers and toes are frozen. I wonder if this is all a dream. It feels like one.

Am I supposed to say something? I don't. I don't. We walk for what seems like hours.

A/N hey friends! I said I wouldn't be able to update but... here we are lol! What did you think of this chapter? Poor Sammy! :(

21

When I step on the ice in my skates for the first time in a month, I could cry.

Ethan skates up beside me and slaps the back of my helmet. "Cameron! How does it feel? Can you still skate, or do you take a quick lesson with the five year olds?"

"Still remember, thanks," I say, chewing on my mouth guard and grinning. I twist the stick in my hands, feeling the worn grooves that my fingers made in the tape. God, it's good to be back. I missed my jersey so much, the number 21 and my last name stitched in red. I want to bury my nose in it and breathe it in.

The air at practice is charged with something special. Everyone's excited that I'm playing again, and with Christmas and the IIHF tournament only a couple weeks away, it's like adrenaline was pumped into the oxygen. The IIHF roster officially came out. I'm the only one from the St. Anne Lions playing for Canada.

After practice, I wince as I unlace my skates in the locker room. My ankle is swollen, like the doctor said it would be. I have to soak my foot in a bucket of ice water twice a day, and let me tell you, that hurts like a mother -

"Beckett."

I glance up. "Hey, Gonzalez."

Matthew's mouth is twisted in a frown, and he's glaring down at me. His dark hair is sweaty against his forehead, and he hasn't changed out of his jersey yet. "So, you're playing at World Juniors."

"Yeah."

"While you're in recovery? Seems odd."

I pull a Lions baseball cap on my head. "Canada calls for me, Gonzalez." I meant for it to be a joke, but his glare just deepens.

"It should be me on that team," he says through gritted teeth.

"I don't know what you want me to do about it."

Matthew shakes his head and swings his hockey bag over his shoulder. "You're nothing but dumb luck, Beckett."

I watch him walk away. What is this guy's problem? My fingers twitch as Ethan slides on the bench beside me.

"So, there's been a change in the music selection on the car ride home," says Ethan. I tie my running shoes, my eyes still following Matthew.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"There's a temporary pause on the 80s music. Now it's Christmas music."

I tear my view away from Matthew and grin at Ethan as I feel my muscles relaxing. "I can live with that," I say.

And I do. We turn up the radio in the car and shout Christmas songs until our voices are hoarse, twinkling house lights flying past the windows.

~

I walk down the school hallway, shifting through papers in my binder. Sam helped me with a math worksheet the other day, but I'm worried I left it on my desk at home. Mrs. Godfrey will kill me if I don't turn it in.

Someone taps my shoulder and I glance behind me. Trina is standing there, holding a thick textbook against her chest.

"Let's talk," she says, pushing her glasses up her nose.

"Trina," I say. I love our little chats. "What's up?"

She juts her head towards her locker, and we move to the side of the hallway. A few lockers are decorated with shit like paper snowflakes or bows. I think there's a locker decorating contest, but then again, I'm not really aware of things like that.

"It's Sam," Trina says. "I think he's getting picked on."

"What do you mean? Why? I mean, who?" I guess there are a lot of things I'm not aware of.

"I don't know. He won't tell me much. But, you know, he's gay *and* he's smart. He's an easy target." Her dark eyebrows raise.

"But -" I shift my books in my hands. "He can't - he's so nice. Will he -"

"I don't know," Trina says again with a hint of annoyance. "He hasn't told me. Maybe he'll talk to you about it. I just thought you should know. That's all."

"Okay," I say. The words taste funny in my mouth. "Thanks for telling me."

"Mm-hmm." Trina brushes past me, her tight ponytail swinging, and disappears into the crowd of students.

I take a shaky breath. I go to math class. How could I go to math class right now? How can Mrs. Godfrey sit there and teach right now? I chew my pencil eraser to a nub.

~

Sam pulls his sweatshirt sleeves over his hands and shivers slightly, flipping through my last math test. He's biting his lip as his eyes quickly scan the pages, leaning against my dresser.

"Okay, so here we need the reciprocal, that's where you made your first mistake..." He's mumbling to himself.

"Mom is making meatloaf for dinner."

"And then you... okay, then you forgot the negative sign here..."

"Sam."

Sam glances up to the ceiling. I can almost see the calculations in his brain. "Four hundred seventy-two multiplied by five is two thousand and..."

"Sam."

His eyes snap to me. "Yeah?"

"We're having meatloaf for dinner."

"Okay."

"Are you getting bullied?"

"What?" I see the surprise flash in his eyes quickly, and then it's gone. "No, why?"

"Trina said so."

Sam rubs his eye tiredly. "Trina is... overprotective."

"Are you though? Getting bullied?"

"Cameron, I'm fine. It's just..."

"What?" I'm sitting on my bed, leaning against the wall, my textbook on my lap. I haven't read a single word in the past ten minutes.

"I don't know. It's meaningless, just some random teasing. It's not a big deal."

"Sam!" I want to slam my textbook shut for dramatic effect, but I don't. "Who is it? I will -"

"Cameron, stop. I don't want to make it a big deal."

"Sam, I..." I rub my forehead. "I said that if you're getting bullied that -"

"I'm asking you to leave it," says Sam. His tone has turned cold - or at least, as cold as Sam could get. He's too sweet to sound too mean. "I can handle it myself."

I sigh, frustration coursing through my body. I crack my knuckles. "Fine," I say.

"Fine."

Sam looks back down. When he's doing math problems, his eyes light up. But they're not lit up now.

I resume chewing on my eraser and glance out the window. The yard is covered in snow, and the sky is grey. My fingers are still tingling. I wish he would tell me who.

22

The week before midterms, Sam, Veronica, and I study together. The only exam I have to worry about is math; French and History have both been really easy this semester. We work in the kitchen when Mom makes dinner or we go to AJ's when she doesn't, comparing notes under the bright fluorescent lighting. Well, more like Sam gives us his old notes.

On the Sunday morning before exam week starts, Mom's eyes go wide when she reads the newspaper.

"Sam's on the front page!" she says, leaning over the counter in her bathrobe and stirring a mug of coffee.

Veronica and I look up from the table. "Why?" I ask.

"Oh my goodness," Mom says, flipping the page. "He won a scholarship. A *huge* scholarship."

"Let me see," Veronica says, and Mom hands her the paper. She crunches her cereal loudly as her eyes scan through the fine print. "Something science-y. Well, we all knew he was smart. That's no surprise."

I grab the paper from her hands and look at it for myself. There's a blurry photo of Sam on the front, shaking hands with the principal and holding a plaque. Even in grainy picture, I can tell he's blushing, and his smile is wide and genuine.

My eyes find the words *University of Toronto.* I frown. "Does that mean he's going to Toronto for school?"

"We can ask him later, I suppose," says Mom, scratching her hair and stretching. "Is he coming over for dinner?"

"I think we're going to AJ's for dinner for last minute cramming," says Veronica, turning to me. "Right?"

"Yeah, sure," I say. The wind howls outside the window and Mom shivers in her thin robe and old pajamas.

"Well, tell him I said congratulations," says Mom. "He is one smart kid."

"We'll tell him, Mom," says Veronica. As Mom shuffles out of the kitchen and down the hallway, Veronica's eyes slide over to mine. "What?"

"Nothing," I say. "He just didn't tell us about this."

"So?"

"I don't know."

Veronica rolls her eyes like I'm being stupid.

~

After a physical therapy appointment for my ankle, I head over to AJ's to meet Veronica and Sam. I push through the glass front door, the bell jingling, and kick snow off my boots.

It's busier in here than normal, the background noise of clanking silverware and quiet conversation filling the air. I slide into a cracked leather booth and pull off my gloves and hat.

"Hey, Cameron." AJ appears at the table with a small notebook in hand. "The usual?"

"Yeah, thanks," I say. "And for Sam and Veronica, too. They should be here soon."

As he walks away, I pull my textbook out of my backpack, trying to organize my old math tests and quizzes. I bite my lip as I scan through the equations. I don't know any of this shit. I can't afford to fail this exam, though.

There's a voice on the other side of the diner that makes me look over my shoulder.

"Claire, don't," says Matthew Gonzalez. He's standing by the booth in the back, running a frustrated hand through his short hair.

"Don't tell me what to do, Matt," says a pretty girl with brown hair in a bun. Her words are sharp and I swear that he winces a bit.

I'm honestly too in shock to do anything. I never, ever see Matthew outside of the rink, even though his Catholic school is only five minutes away from mine. I don't mean to stare, but I am.

"Babe, can we just talk about it?" He tucks his hands into his pockets and rocks nervously on his toes. If he didn't hate me, I would feel a bit sorry for the guy.

"I have to go," snaps Claire. Matthew's eyes follow her out of the diner, a defeated look on his face. That's when he catches my eye and his frown turns into a scowl.

"Beckett," he says icily, walking up to me. "Are you spying on me?"

"What? No! I'm just here to -"

"Just stop," says Matthew. His dark eyes are ablaze with sudden anger. "You're always screwing with my life."

" *Me* screwing with *your* life? You're the one that puts my hockey career in jeopardy."

"You do that to yourself. You get everything you ask for, and you still mess things up."

I realize I'm standing on my feet, and my hands are clenched at my side. "You think my life is so easy?"

"Yeah, I do. You don't work for anything."

"Just because I'm not arguing with my girlfriend doesn't mean I don't work for things, Gonzalez."

"Right, like you've had a girlfriend."

For some reason, my breath hitches a little. "That doesn't - I mean -"

He sneers. "You're just a pussy that uses hockey to hide the fact that you're a loner with no -"

I don't realize I've swung at him until after it happens. He reacts quickly, throwing a punch right back, and I hear someone gasp dramatically at a nearby table. I don't care. I want to hurt him. And that's scary, a little. My fingers tingle like they do before a game.

"Boys! Boys, stop it!" AJ is wedging himself in between us. "That's enough!"

I taste blood. My lip is busted.

"Fuck you, Beckett," snaps Gonzalez, and he marches out of the diner into the snow. He brushes past Sam as Sam walks through the door, his blue eyes wide and his hands tucked in his coat pockets

I look at the ground. AJ is shouting at me in French, his native tongue, but it's too fast for me to understand. "I'm sorry," I hear myself mumble, and push my way to the bathroom in the back.

The bathroom is dim and empty, the tap dripping quietly. Sam pushes through the door behind me. He's wearing his favorite green sweatshirt. "What happened?"

"Nothing," I say, looking into the mirror. It's dirty and cracked, and the dark emerald tiles that coat the bathroom walls look to be about fifty years old.

"Your lip," says Sam.

"I know."

In the mirror, I catch a glimpse of his face. It's sad, and I look away. God, I hate that face.

"I didn't mean to fight him," I say. "I mean, I didn't want to. He started it." But that's not true. I started it. Why would I do that?

Sam wets a paper towel and presses it against my lip.

"Ow."

"You're so stupid."

"I know," I say.

He sighs. I could count the faint freckles on his nose. "You're going to ruin your own NHL career."

"I know."

"What'd he say?"

"Nothing."

"You don't like to fight," Sam says, like speaking the words could make them true.

"Okay."

He pulls away, the paper towel spotted with red.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Why are you apologizing to me?" Sam throws the paper towel away and leans against the wall. Is he mad?

But I *do* want to apologize to him. I'm sorry that he saw. And I'm sorry that I'm always hurting him. But I don't say any of those things.

"We saw you in the paper this morning," I say.

"Oh, that." His cheeks turn pink.

"So you're going to Toronto?"

"Probably not. I just won't use the scholarship."

"Why?"

"I think I want to be closer."

"Sam."

"What?"

"You should use it. It would be stupid not to."

Sam swings open the bathroom door, the murmur of people chatting washing in through the doorway. "Well, you do stupid things, I do stupid things, can we just study math now?" He walks out.

I think he is mad. I follow him. But he's right. I do stupid things when I'm angry. And I don't know why I feel this way.

A/N I had no direction for this chapter when I started writing, these characters really write themselves haha. Vote if you liked and comment your thoughts!! I honestly love writing this story and am already dreading for when it's over. :(

23

I step outside of my math classroom and rub my eyes. Everyone in the hallway is cheering and laughing and talking loudly - the last exam, math, just ended. It's officially winter break.

Ethan is making out with Lacy against my locker. Lacy has straight blonde hair that spills down her back and long, red fingernails. I clear my throat as I glance around the halls. People are cleaning out their lockers and slamming them shut, airy conversations echoing through open doorways.

Ethan notices me and grins. "Hey, dude!" he says. He has a faint smudge of lipstick on his lip.

"Hi Cameron," says Lacy sweetly. She wraps her arm around Ethan's waist and he pulls her tight. "Are you excited for World Juniors?"

"Hey guys," I say. "You bet."

"He's leaving on Christmas Day," Ethan says, sticking his free hand in his sweatshirt pocket. "Disrespecting Jesus Christ on his birthday. How much lower can you get?"

Lacy looks horrified.

"Yeah, yeah," I say. "The tournament starts the 26th. I don't have a choice." Mom is kind of mad about it. My flight isn't until the afternoon though, so I'll be here to open gifts and stuff.

"Well," says Lacy, fluffing her hair and pulling it in front of her shoulder. "My family and I will be cheering for you."

"Please tell them I said thank you."

Ethan pulls out his phone and glances at the time. "Okay, we should go," he says to Lacy. "Cameron, I'll talk to you later?"

"Sure."

He punches my shoulder. Jesus, that hurts. "By the way, how do you think you did on the exam?"

"Eh."

"Yeah, same." He flashes a grin at me. "Okay, see you."

"Bye."

Lacy smiles and waves as they head down the hallway, and I rub my eyes again. I have a bad feeling in my stomach about the exam.

Outside, I dig through my pockets for my car keys, my boots sinking in the shallow layer of snow. The sky is a deep grey, and the air smells refreshingly cold and of pine trees.

"Cameron!"

I glance over my shoulder as I pull out my keys, swinging them on my finger. "Hey. Want a ride?"

Sam smiles and shivers, walking fast to catch up with me. "Okay," he says, his cheeks flushed and his eyes bright. "I'm coming over later anyway, right?"

"Oh, yeah."

"I told Hailey we'd make gingerbread cookies. My mom had this cookbook with a bunch of good recipes in it."

"Well, I'm excited to eat them."

Sam smiles, and I smile too. "When do you leave for World Juniors?" he asks.

"Four days. Christmas, remember?"

"Oh, right."

I unlock the car and slide in behind the steering wheel, rubbing my hands before twisting the ignition on.

Sam studies me from the passenger seat. "Are you okay? You seem quiet."

"I'm just tired."

"Why, was the exam bad?"

I check my mirrors. "Maybe. I don't know."

Sam sits quietly and waits for me to keep talking.

"I might've failed it."

"What?" Sam grins and shakes his head. "We studied together. You knew your stuff. There's no way you failed it."

"Yeah, I felt good studying. But once I got the exam, I barely remembered anything."

Sam's eyes soften a bit. "I feel that way taking big exams too," he says. "Like I don't know anything. But I do, and you do too. You did well, Cameron."

I chew on my fingernails as we sit at a red light, the blinker clicking. A light dusting of snow begins to fall. "If I failed it..."

"You didn't."

"But -"

"Hey, look at me."

I glance sideways at him. His blue eyes are big and bright, lined with long eyelashes. It's a nice shade, with little flecks of darker blue. A poet would compare it to an ocean. I don't.

"You did well," Sam says again. "Now it's Christmas time! And hockey time. You don't need to think about math anymore. Okay?"

"Okay," I say. I take a deep breath. A car behind me honks and I look back to the road, the light green. I press on the gas.

~

Olivia shakes out her curly dark hair and grins broadly at the camera, her lips lined with a deep maroon lipstick. "Good evening Channel 5 News, I'm here again with Cameron Beckett, Canada's teenage hockey extraordinaire. In just a couple days, Cameron will be playing for Team Canada in Finland."

I smile at Olivia, forcing myself to keep my hands still. Behind the camera, Mom, Veronica, and Hailey are watching me against the living room wall. It's three days until Christmas, and Channel 5 asked to do a last-minute news segment on me before I left for the tournament.

"So, Cameron," says Olivia cheerfully, her eyes sliding to meet mine. "You've recently just overcame an injury. Would you tell us a bit about that?"

"Sure," I say. "I sprained my ankle about a month ago during a game. Thankfully, I recovered pretty quickly."

"That's spectacular. Just in time for the World Junior Championship." She laughs lightly towards the camera. "How are you feeling about the Championship? Any nerves?"

"Maybe a little," I say. "I'm more excited than anything. The World Juniors are always so fun."

"That's great. You certainly will have millions of fans by the time you return to St. Anne."

I make myself smile. "Yeah, it'll be different, for sure."

"Lastly, Cameron, what are you hoping to achieve over in Finland?"

"Um, just improving my hockey skills really, and doing the best job I can in representing my country."

Olivia nods thoughtfully and turns to face the camera. "Thanks so much for speaking with us, Cameron. Our viewers can watch Cameron and the rest of Team Canada play by checking the schedule on the Channel 5 website. Back to you, Mark."

I exhale deeply as Walter, the boom mike guy, hits the record button and the red light goes off. They take the mic off my tie, congratulate me, and then are gone.

Mom brushes an invisible speck of dust off my coat shoulder. "That was nice," she says.

"Thanks, Mom."

She smiles at me. Up close, you can see all the wrinkles that line her tired face. Her short blonde hair is tucked behind her ears. "I'm so proud of you. I wish I could go with you to Finland."

"It's okay," I say. Money is too tight right now, and it's not like she could take over two weeks off work anyway.

"Will you call us when you're there?"

"Of course," I say. "I'm not leaving for another couple days, anyway."

"I know." She smiles weakly and smoothes my coat shoulder clean again. She takes a quick breath and blinks quickly. "Okay, go get changed. We're about to watch the movie."

It's a relief changing out of my suit and into a sweatshirt and sweatpants. I curl up on the couch beside Hailey. Every year, we watch *It's A Wonderful Life* together. I text Sam to come over, because I know he likes old movies.

Hailey rests her head against my shoulder and pulls the knit blanket up, her eyelashes fluttering sleepily. The Christmas tree is lit up brightly in the corner beside the television, and it makes the entire house smell like

cinnamon and pine. Fire is crackling in the fireplace, and snow is lazily drifting down outside the window. I feel myself dozing off, too. Sam joins us as the movie starts and Veronica makes everyone hot chocolate, and we all watch the movie together.

"Hey, Cameron," whispers Hailey during the movie.

"Yeah?"

"Can I go with you to Finland?"

I smile. "Not this time."

"I'm gonna miss you."

"I'm gonna miss you too. But I'll call you all the time."

"Okay."

It's Christmas time. And hockey time. And family time. And I can forget about my math grade.

A/N asfhkerejflaksjfoiauwelrkjs hold onto your hats people. I really wanna write the next like 4 chapters tonight but we'll see how much I get done lol. Also, I'm really at a crossroads plot wise someone pray for me. I don't want to make it too dramatic and unrealistic ya feel?? yikes

24

On Christmas Eve, Hailey, Veronica, and I get matching pajamas. They're red flannel with a reindeer on the chest pocket, and Hailey puts hers on in the morning and wears it the entire day.

Sam comes over in the afternoon. His uncle is working today, so Mom invited him over for dinner. Hailey gets to the door first when the bell rings.

"Look at my pajamas, Sam!" she says. Veronica braided her hair earlier, and she's wearing fluffy snowflake socks. "Do you like them?"

"I love them," says Sam, stepping through the front door and pulling off his coat. "It smells delicious in here."

"That's the lasagna!" calls Mom from the kitchen. We always have lasagna on Christmas Eve. She sticks her head past the kitchen doorway and waves at Sam, a Christmas oven mitt on her hand. "Come in, come in! We're decorating cookies for Santa now."

Hailey grabs Sam's hand and pulls him towards the kitchen counter, and I lean against the back of the sofa. The warm scent of fresh shortbread cookies and sweet frosting mingle in the air. A Christmas tune plays quietly from the radio, and laughter floats from the kitchen. I tuck my hands into my sweatshirt pocket and smile.

Under the tree, a small collection of sadly-wrapped gifts sits. Well, the sadly-wrapped ones are from me. I got a necklace for Mom, a set of colorful pens for Veronica, and a Barbie for Hailey. I think I did okay this year. Sam went shopping with me a few weeks ago and helped with the necklace. I don't know about any of that stuff.

In the kitchen, Hailey giggles. "No, Sam, Santa's hat can't be blue."

"Why not?"

"Because it should be - Veronica, stop eating the frosting!"

Veronica shrugs and licks red frosting off a butter knife. "I'm done," she says, setting it in the sink as she glances at me. "Cameron, come decorate with us."

I stand beside Sam at the counter, picking up a cookie in the shape of a pine tree. Sam nudges my arm. "Are you packed?"

"Yeah, pretty much. My suitcase is almost ready."

"You'll have so much fun." He looks at me and smiles. He's wearing his Harvard sweatshirt.

"Yeah," says Hailey. "We're going to watch every game, Cameron."

"Every game?" I make a face at her and she shrieks with laughter.

Mom scoops a pile of sliced peppers into a salad bowl. "Yes, every game," she says. "Go Cameron!"

"What are you gonna do if you win?" asks Hailey, biting into a cookie overloaded with frosting and sprinkles.

"If Canada wins the tournament? I don't know. Celebrate?"

Her big brown eyes go all glossy. "Wow, I hope you win."

I smile. "Yeah, me too."

After the cookies are finished, we all sprawl out in the living room, the fire crackling. Homemade knit stockings line the mantle. We pull out an old board game and play on the coffee table, sitting on the rug, laughing as the wind rattles the windowpanes.

When it gets closer to dinnertime, Hailey and Veronica go to their room to wash up for dinner. Sam and I go into my bedroom.

"I have a present for you," he says, pulling his sweatshirt sleeves over his hands. He sits on my bed and holds out a box wrapped in reindeer patterned paper.

"Thank you," I say. "I have a gift for you too." It's probably the best gift I've ever bought anyone. It's a big book full of glossy NASA photographs of planets and space and stuff. It was expensive as hell.

I take the gift from him and run my hands over the shimmery wrapper. "Should I open it now or tomorrow morning?"

"Whatever," says Sam. "Maybe tomorrow."

"Okay. Here." I hand him the NASA photography book, very badly wrapped. "Open it tomorrow too."

He smiles. "Thank you."

Sam shivers and looks around my room at all the hockey posters and trophies, darkening evening light pouring in through my window. Snowflakes melt on the glass. His gaze lands on the Leafs poster on my ceiling, and I look up, too.

"I'm going to miss you when you're gone," he says. "You know, you're missing a few days of school."

"I know, I hate that."

He smiles. "Shut up."

I look back down. He's sitting close enough that I can count every freckle, even every eyelash, and the corner of his mouth is turned up slightly.

"I'm going to miss you too," I say.

His eyes meet mine. And then Sam Hughes is kissing me.

I kissed a girl once. When I was fourteen. Veronica dragged me to one of her friend's birthday parties, and a big group of us sat in this dark, damp

basement and played spin the bottle. When it was my turn, the bottle landed on a girl named Mia. She had yellow-y blonde hair and pink braces, and she tasted like spit and bubblegum lip gloss.

Sam doesn't taste like that at all.

Sam tastes like honey and warm sugar, his soft lips pressing against mine, the heat of him radiating on my skin. Sam smells like frosting and cinnamon and pine trees and the cotton of sweatshirts and clean snow and shampoo, and his lips are warm and soft and so are mine and I am kissing Sam Hughes. And that's when I realize. I'm kissing Sam Hughes back.

I'm shoving him away roughly. "What the fuck?" That's me. I say that. I stand up. Sam's eyes are wide and scared.

"I don't know why I did that," says Sam, standing up slowly. "I'm sorry, Cameron -"

"Get out." My voice is so cold and mean. Am I saying that? My finger is pointing to the door.

"Cameron -"

"Get out right now." Why am I saying these things? Why am I saying these things? Sam tastes like honey. *"Go."*

Sam leaves. I slam the door behind him. I hear him talking in the kitchen, the voices muffled.

"Sam! Are you leaving? Dinner is almost ready!"

"It's my uncle, he's home now, he wants to eat with me."

"Well, invite him over! There's certainly enough food for one more."

"It's okay, I should go."

"What happened? You don't have to go right now -"

"Merry Christmas, Ms. Beckett."

I hear the front door shut softly. My head is pressed against my bedroom door and my breathing is shaky. Sam Hughes tastes like honey. Why would he kiss me? My hands are shaking. What am I supposed to do now? I feel sick. I say that I'm sick. I skip dinner and go to bed early.

~

On Christmas morning, I open my gifts. Veronica makes pancakes. Sam's gift to me is unopened and I kick it underneath my bed. It's snowing outside. I hug my family goodbye. Of course I'm sad, I'm going to miss them. I take the public bus to the airport. It's busy and loud and muffled.

I get a window seat on the plane. I think about hockey. Of course I'm thinking about hockey, I'm going to Finland to play. When St. Anne fades into the distance, a minuscule dot thousands of meters below the plane, I'm relieved.

A/N skdjfhksjdhfk you guys

25

I don't call home very often in Finland. I say I'm really busy. I am really busy. We play a game almost every day.

I like my jersey. It's red and white, my last name stitched above the number 21. I breathe it in, breathe in the scent of ice on the rink, the lights flashing over the arena, the screaming fans, the cameras that line the boards. I've never played in front of this many people before. I love it.

I love the way my fingers tingle when I grab my stick, the slicing of the ice underneath my blades. I don't think about anything else. I've never played better. Canada is winning almost every game. I score hat tricks.

At night in the hotel room, I see my name flooding in on my phone, hockey articles and sport reports. On the TV, they talk about me. I don't like to watch, though. I turn my phone off. I sleep. My roommate is a nice guy named Brandon from Nova Scotia, a defender, but we don't really talk more than we have to.

Finland is coated in a layer of glistening snow. On the few free days we have, the team goes sightseeing around the city. We always wear our Canada jackets, red and lined with fleece. I don't like that part as much, though. I like it when we're playing.

The coach is a nice enough guy. He screams a lot on the bench, but every coach does that. My ankle hurts when I play, but I don't care. I don't care.

I get two texts from Sam. The first one I got the third day of the tournament.

I love the gift so much, thank you

The second one was a couple hours after that.

I'm sorry about what happened, I wasn't really thinking, maybe we could talk?

I don't reply to either. I don't have time to talk. I play hockey and play hockey and play hockey until my mind is numb. I tie up laces and put on my helmet. When someone scores, we celebrate on the ice, the crowd roaring and pounding against the wall. In the locker room, when reporters are asking questions, I smile and nod and pull my Canada baseball hat over my head.

Some nights, I have a nightmares that I can't remember. I turn on the TV and watch old movies that are playing, the volume down way low so it won't wake up Brandon. I like Finland. A week goes by, and then two.

We're the top team in the playoffs. I know that millions of people are watching, but it doesn't seem real. I don't like to think about it, anyway. I don't like to think about anything at all. I just play hockey.

Before the gold medal game, Mom calls me and tells me good luck, that I'll do amazing, that everyone at home is cheering for me. I wonder if Sam is over at the house. He probably is. In the locker room, the coach gives a pep talk. He's wearing a red tie. I run my fingers over my stick as they start to tingle.

The game starts. I score three goals in the first two periods. The arena is so loud it hurts my brain, but I kind of tune it out. I chew on my mouthguard and pass the puck and shoot the puck and check players and do everything I'm supposed to do until the buzzer goes off and the game is over and we won. And everyone is screaming in my ear and we're all huddled up together and the lights are flashing, but I'm not as excited as I thought I would be because the tournament is over now.

We get medals. We sing the national anthem. But I feel like I'm not even there, that I'm watching myself from a blurry screen far away. There are after-game interviews and photographs, and that night in the hotel, the team has a big party. Everything smells like sweat and ice, and I like the feel of the gold medal around my neck, the smooth ribbon and the cold, textured metal.

The day we fly back to Canada, the sky is cold and pale grey, and the airport is airy and busy. I sit on an uncomfortable chair with my back to the

window, watching people rush by with suitcases and children. Intercom speakers crackle. I'm wearing my Canada jacket. A few people come up to me and say that they watched me play, that I'm really good. I say thank you.

My phone vibrates, and it's from Veronica.

sam is in the hospital

And that's when the tournament is really over.

A/N WE'RE GOIN ON A FEELS TRIP PEOPLE!! also, this chapter was written in a really different style than usual but that was very purposeful

26

The last time I was at the St. Anne hospital, it was when Veronica broke her arm nine years ago. It looks exactly the same now as it did then, with bright lights and fake plants and blue and white checkered tiles. Nurses in teal scrubs run down the hallways, pushing carts with squeaky wheels.

My chest is so tight that it hurts to breathe. My hands are in my coat pockets. Veronica said the room is 414, 414, 414, and I whisper the number as my eyes scan the doorways. A nurse walking quickly down the hallway brushes against my shoulder, but I barely notice. 411. 412. 413. 414. The door is blue and cracked open, and I step inside.

"Cameron?"

"Sam." I bite my lip so hard that the metallic taste of blood springs in my mouth. I feel like I'm choking, and my breathing is uneven and gaspy.

Sam sits up in the hospital bed, wincing. "I'm okay. Don't cry, Cameron."

"I'm not." But I blink and my eyes are wet.

Sam looks at me sadly. But it's not Sam. This new Sam has a deep bruise around his eye, blossoming purple and green and grey, and a cheek so swollen you can barely see the blue of his eyes.

"Don't cry," he says again, but it's a whisper, and I can hardly hear him over the pounding of my heart.

There's a plastic chair that I pull up beside the bed. I sit down. "Sam." I hate the way my voice cracks. "What happened?"

"A cracked rib. And a minor concussion. I'm okay."

That's not the question that I asked. "I'm so sorry, Sam." I hate the way my lungs are burning. I hate the way my head is spinning. "I should've been

here. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

Sam tries to smile. "You're here now."

"I'm sorry, Sam." I hate the way my hands are shaking. I hate the noise that's spilling in from the hallway, the beeping of machines and the voices of doctors, and the wind that's howling against the window in the cold night.

"Cameron," he says softly. "Cameron?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Who did this?" When I open them, he's staring at me sadly. "Tell me."

"I don't remember. And you don't like to fight."

"Yes I do. Tell me who did this."

Sam's mouth twitches and a tear falls down his bruised face. "I don't remember," he whispers. "I didn't see their faces."

I feel like I'm going to throw up. My throat feels raw. "I'm so sorry, Sam. I'm so, so sorry."

"Cameron."

"Sam." I squeeze my eyes shut again as the room starts to blur. "I should've been here."

"Cameron, it's okay. Please don't cry, Cameron. You're here now, okay?"

I blink up at the ceiling. A lamp in the corner washes a yellow light over the small room, and a fake potted plant stands in the opposite corner. Fuck that plant. Fuck this. My fingers twitch.

"When did this happen?"

"Last night," Sam says.

"After the championship game?"

"Yeah."

I bite my lip again. I want to run my fingers over the bruise and make it better.

"Has my family been here yet?"

"Yeah." Sam tries to smile. "Hailey and Veronica baked me cookies."

I press my hands against my forehead and glance out the window. Icy rain is spilling from the cloudy night sky. "Sam."

"Cameron."

"I'm sorry."

"I know," says Sam. "But you don't have to be sorry."

"Just say you forgive me."

"I forgive you."

The room blurs again and I blink it away. Sam watches me, his soft lips twisted sadly. From a room down the hallway, I hear someone crying.

I clear my throat. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Just stay with me."

"Okay." My fingers tingle again, though. I don't want to stay. I want to fight. I want to crack somebody's rib and give them a concussion like they did to Sam. I sit on my hands. I don't like to fight. I do like to fight.

I stay with Sam. He makes me tell him about Finland, about winning gold. He says everyone in St. Anne has been talking about me, that everyone here is so proud of me. I don't feel it, though. My chest is so hollow.

After awhile, Sam dozes off. He twitches fitfully. I leave to get some air. I stuff my hands in my pockets.

There's a nurse walking down the hallway that I nearly run into. "Oh, sorry!" she says.

"S'okay."

She glances behind me. "Did you just come from room 414? Sam Hughes?"

My eyes find hers. She has wavy brown hair with streaks of grey, and kind eyes lined with shallow wrinkles. A stethoscope is looped around her neck, and she's holding an unorganized clipboard.

"Yeah."

"He is such a sweet boy," she says. "So polite. Such a shame, what happened to him."

"What happened?"

She clicks her tongue and shakes her head. "A group of boys jumped him. Someone walking nearby found him."

"Found him?"

She squints kindly at me. "Are you alright, honey?"

"Oh," I say. I make it to the bathroom before I throw up.

~

I open Sam's gift. It's *War and Peace.*

~

Because of his concussion, Sam gets to miss a few days of school. I cut class when I can, or always leave right after the last bell, and sit with him. He doesn't talk as much. I tell him about what's happening in all my classes.

I read *War and Peace* out loud. I don't understand it. But the words sound elegant and nice and clean.

When he's cleared from the hospital, we take walks around the block. He doesn't say it, but I know it still hurts. He winces as we walk, sometimes. I wish I would hold his hand.

He comes over for dinner a lot. "The swelling looks better," Mom says one night.

He blushes. He doesn't like to talk about it. "Yeah."

I remember my nightmares now. Sam is unconscious on the icy ground and someone is kicking him. And I can't help him.

We watch old movies. Sam starts to feel better.

I feel so broken.

It snows and snows and snows.

A/N you guys this hurt to write oh my god

27

I never thought I would be the kind of person to have a breakdown. But after a home game one night, everyone's changing in the locker room and talking, and Sam has been home from the hospital for a week, and I'm so, so tired, I just start crying.

Everyone freezes and goes really quiet. But I can't stop the way my shoulders are shaking, and I sit on the bench and try to breathe as I choke out sobs. Then Matthew is the first to react.

"Give him some space," he says. "Everyone, get out for a minute." The team mumbles as they finish pulling on their shirts, dark blue lockers slamming. "Everybody, go." They listen to their co-captain. Ethan shoots me a confused look before the locker room door slams shut, and then it's just me and Matthew.

I think he's going to punch me and my body tenses, but he just sits down on the bench.

"Why are you crying?"

"It's nothing."

"Don't bullshit me, Beckett." I've never heard him talk that way to me before. He doesn't sound like he wants to kill me.

I glance up at him. My face is heating up. How fucking pathetic can you get? "I said, it's nothing."

"You've been acting different." Matthew is staring at me with a neutral face, his dark eyes and sharp features flashing in the fluorescent light. At least he's not trying to be sympathetic.

"I'm tired."

"You don't cry when you're tired."

"Can you just leave me the fuck alone?" I rub at my cheeks with my jersey sleeve. "I haven't slept well recently."

"Right."

"Besides, you hate me."

Matthew's eyes narrow like he's offended. "I don't hate you."

"Yes, you do."

"Maybe I did, sometimes. But not right now. How can I hate a guy who's crying? That's embarrassing."

"Shut *up* ."

"I'm just asking. Why are you crying?"

I stare at my hands on my lap and don't answer. He scowls.

"Our best player is currently crying in the fucking locker room. How are we supposed to win games like that?"

I shrug. I worried that if I talk, I'll start crying again.

"Tell me," Matthew says. "What is it? School? Your parents? It very fucking well can't be hockey, you just won a gold medal at World Juniors, for fuck's sake -"

"I said shut *up* , Matthew."

"Honestly, if you're just going to sit here and cry like a -"

"I can't be a gay hockey player." The words hang in the air like a dead weight.

Shock washes over Matthew's face. "What?"

"I can't be a gay hockey player." I stare at my hands and stare at my hands and stare at my hands as heavy tears threaten to fall.

Matthew is quiet for a long time. Then, softer than he's ever spoken before, he asks, "Why?"

I glare at him, anger suddenly flaring inside of me. I know my eyes are red and blotchy. "Do you know how many gay players have played in the NHL?"

"Um, no -"

"Zero."

"So?"

"I can't be gay and be a good hockey player, Matthew." I know my words sound desperate, and something like fear flickers through Matthew's eyes. "I can't be both. Great hockey players aren't gay. I want to be a great hockey player."

"You can still be a -"

"No, I can't. Do you know how many people are watching me? How many people like me? All the news articles online about me?"

Matthew nods slowly.

"Do you know how they'd react? In this fucking religious town, do you really not know how they'd react?" I'm standing on my feet, my hands clenched at my side. "Do you know what some people do to gay people?"

Matthew opens his mouth to say something, but I don't let him.

"Do you know how religious my family is? Do you know how shit like this would affect my career, my friendships, my family? Do you know what some people do to gay people? The way they hurt them? I've seen it. Do you know how many gay players in the NHL there are?"

Matthew looks frozen, sitting on the bench, his eyes wide. He stays silent.

"You know how many!" I shout. My words are so angry and mean they could catch fire.

"Soon there'll be one," he says, not unkindly.

And then I'm crying again, my angry words doused in water, and I can't stop.

Matthew just watches me, and I sit on the ground against the lockers and jesus, everything hurts so bad and I hate feeling this way, I hate the way everything hurts and I hate the way Sam is hurt and I hate this sport that I love.

Matthew clears his throat. "Can you like, talk to your parents about it or anything?" He shifts on the bench, obviously uncomfortable, but he hasn't left. "Your dad?"

"I don't have a dad."

"Oh. Your mom?"

I shrug, rubbing the harsh fabric of my jersey against my cheek. "I don't know."

Matthew pushes his tongue against the inside of his mouth like he's struggling with what to say. "Cameron... you're a good player."

"Matthew, shut up."

"No, seriously. An amazing player, actually. You shouldn't..." he sighs. He's not very good with words. Neither am I. "I mean, every single NHL team is dying to have you. They'd take you no matter what... or who... or, whatever. You know."

I shrug again.

"You shouldn't have to sacrifice... you know, loving someone, to play the game you're great at."

I stare at my sneakers. "Everyone will hate me."

"I won't hate you." I glance up and he laughs. "Anymore. I won't hate you anymore."

"It's hard," I say.

"What about other gay kids that like hockey? Or any sport, really? They'll, y'know, look up to you."

"It's hard."

"I know," says Matthew. "But...won't it make you happy?"

The locker room door swings open and we both jump. Ethan sticks his head in.

"Are you guys okay?" he calls out, his voice echoing throughout the room. His eyes bounce back between Matthew and I.

"Yeah," says Matthew, standing up. He swings his bag over his shoulder and stretches out his hand. I grab it and he pulls me up. Then he walks out of the locker room, brushing past Ethan.

Ethan's eyes are wide, scanning me up and down. I pull my baseball hat lower over my face.

"Are you okay, dude?" he breathes.

"Yeah," I say. "Let's just go."

Ethan doesn't put on any music in the car, so we listen to the thumping of cold rain against the roof and the squeak of the windshield wipers. He's quiet, for once.

Soon there'll be one.

That's the first time Matthew and I have called each other by our first names.

Won't it make you happy?

A/N progress people progress. also, are we kind of nearing the end of the book? maybe slightly? idk? I don't plan these things out so I guess we'll find out together? thanks everyone for all the votes and comments, this book is #430 right now in teen fic which is crazy!! :)

28

I toss my baseball in the air, blinking up at the Maple Leafs poster on my ceiling. The wind rattles my windowpane, and thick, wet snowflakes stick against the glass. I slept horribly last night. Or really, I didn't sleep at all.

"Hi, Cameron."

I catch my baseball and glance towards the door. Hailey is standing in the hallway, her hair in a tangled ponytail, wearing a red sweatshirt of Veronica's that's huge on her.

"Hi, Hailey."

"Is Mum home? I need help with long division."

I sit up and rub my face. "No, she's out with Veronica. On Saturdays they always go grocery shopping, remember? Do you want me to help you?"

She runs up and jumps on my bed beside me, the springs squeaking. "You're horrible at math," she says.

I smile. "Maybe Sam would be better."

"Yeah." She thinks for a minute, her brown eyes swimming in thought. "Cameron?"

"Yeah?"

"Why would somebody hurt Sam?"

My breath hitches a little. "I don't know," I say softly.

"Hurting people is not nice. That's what Mrs. Webster tells us. Use your words."

"Yeah, that would be better."

"Did they try to use their words?" Hailey looks up at me, her eyes wide with innocence. "When they hurt Sam?"

"Probably not."

"Why would they do that?" Her face scrunches up with confusion. "Mum said I wasn't allowed to ask Sam. Can I ask you?"

"Okay."

"Did Sam say something mean? Did he take something from them?"

"No." I glance over my sister's head out the window. "Sam likes other boys. Did you know that?"

"No."

"He does. And some people don't like that."

"Why don't they like that?"

I shrug. "I don't know, Hailey."

She sits on my lap and presses her head against my chest. "I like other boys. Do people not like that?"

"What? Who do you like?"

She giggles. "There's a boy in my class named Walter. He has the coolest sneakers."

I smile. Oh, Jesus. "Okay," I say. "Um, no, people don't mind that. But Sam is a boy who likes boys."

"Well, I don't mind that."

"That's good."

"I like Sam."

"Me too."

She takes her head off my chest and studies me. "Don't be sad, Cameron."

"I'm not."

"Do you want to watch a movie? Mary Poppins?"

"Okay."

"Carry me to the couch!"

I stand up, swinging her around, and she laughs.

In the living room, I start the movie and curl up on the sofa. I think I doze off pretty early. I don't dream anything at all.

~

There's a knocking at the door that jolts me awake, my heart beating. Hailey frowns at me.

"Shh," she whispers loudly. Mom is sitting beside her, and they're sharing a bowl of popcorn. "The movie is almost over. Someone's knocking."

Groggily, I push the blanket off me and stumble towards the front door. I know it's Sam before I open it.

"Hi," Sam says, bouncing on his toes. The discolored skin around his eye has faded, but it's still clearly a faint shade of purple. At least the swelling has gone down. He twists his mouth and glances up at me with wide eyes.

"Hey Sam!" yells Hailey from the couch.

"Hi Hailey," Sam calls, then turns back to me. "Want to take a walk?"

"Sure," I say, pulling my coat from the rack and slipping my boots on. "Let's go."

"It's really cold out there," says Mom, turning to look at us over her shoulder. "Don't be out long."

"We won't," I say, and step outside, shutting the door behind me.

We sink in the thick snow, not saying much. Not many cars or people are on the streets. The harsh wind bites our skin, and I stuff my hands deep in my pockets as my eyes start to water from the cold. Bare trees shudder as we walk beneath them.

Sam is shivering. He's talking less than usual, and walking faster than usual. I don't know if I'm supposed to say something, so I don't. I match his pace and bury my face in the collar of my coat as the wind howls in my ear.

As the neighborhood rink comes into view at the end of the block, I'm gritting my teeth. Maybe we should've stayed home.

I nod towards the rink. "Want to warm up inside?"

Sam shrugs. Snowflakes are melting on his cheeks like freckles. He follows me as I step through the front door, kicking sticky snow off my boots. It's not much warmer in here, but at least there's no wind.

"George?" My voice echoes around the rink, but it seems to be empty. The lighting is dark but the ice is a bright white, and old posters flutter in the rafters. I look back at Sam, who's staring at his shoes. "We'll just stay a minute."

We sit down on a bench beside the ice, and I rub my frozen hands. I glance sideways at Sam.

His fingers brush gently against his bruise, and his face crumples suddenly.

"Hey, hey," I say, my pulse quickening. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," he says.

"You can talk to me."

He twists his mouth, long eyelashes blinking out towards the ice. He takes a deep breath. "My uncle is sick."

My heart sinks. "Tom? What happened?"

"Cancer. They caught it early, but still." He glances at me, his eyes wide. "That's why I can't go to Toronto. Right? He's taken care of me my entire life, shouldn't I take care of him?"

I wish I had the answers. "I don't know," I say.

"Me neither." He looks back to the rink, fingering the soft skin around his eye again. "Fuck. This still hurts."

There's a sting to his words that I've never heard before. Actually, I'm not sure if I've ever heard Sam curse before. "Sam."

"I hate them." His eyes flutter shut, and he feels the bruise on his eyelid. "Maybe I shouldn't hate them. But I do."

"Me too."

"You know, I got a B on my last French test."

"So? That's not bad."

"A B? For me, that's horrible. Things have been crazy lately. I just wish it would go back to the way it was, you know? Back in the fall."

It's different, seeing Sam like this. God, it hurts. He's always so happy and kind, with flushed cheeks and bright eyes and a warm smile. But now his mouth is twisted sadly, and his hand is covering his closed, purple eye, and he looks so tired and so sad.

His other hand is resting on the bench, and I let my fingers brush against his, let my fingers curl around his -

He pulls away as his right hand drops from his eye. "Cameron."

I feel like I've been stabbed. "Sam."

"You don't have to do this."

"Do what?"

"I'm sorry I kissed you. I shouldn't have done that. You don't have to do..." he takes a shaky breath. "You don't have to do what you think I want you to."

" *Do* you want me to?"

He puts his hand back against his eye and scowls. "Cameron. Shut up."

"Sam."

"Cameron."

Fuck, this is so hard. And I don't know how to do this.

"Sam," I say again, softer. "I'm sorry."

"Can't we just go back to studying math?" He has both hands against his bruise now, and his eyes are squeezed shut tightly. "When did things get so messy?"

"Probably when Hailey was crushing on you." I wish he would smile.

"That would be a long time ago," he says, and sighs. "We should head back."

"Are you staying for dinner?"

"Probably not."

His fingernails look like they're digging into his skin, and I reach out and grab his hands. His eyes are shining with tears.

"I'm sorry, Sam," I whisper.

He shrugs. "You don't have to be sorry," he says softly, and his mouth turns up slightly.

And then I'm kissing Sam Hughes.

He tastes like honey and snow and cinnamon and ice, and I press my hand against the side of his cheek as he un-tenses and kisses me back, and his lips are so soft on mine.

When he pulls away, I want him to come back.

"Cameron." He's staring at me with wide eyes. "Is this okay?"

I don't know. I feel all tingly inside and I can't think straight. "Yeah."

"Really?" He's smiling now.

I press my hand against his ear and kiss him again, and this time he doesn't hesitate. I kiss him until my mouth hurts.

~

I toss my baseball in the air, blinking up at the Maple Leafs poster on my ceiling. I can hear pots clanking around in the kitchen, the thick scent of tomato soup curling under the crack in my door.

I catch the worn, leathered ball in my fingers. Fuck. I kissed Sam Hughes. Again. I smile a little.

The future is going to hurt so bad. But right now I feel so good.

A/N can I get a what what

29

I pick at my sandwich wrap, not hungry. The cafeteria is loud with the squeaks of chairs and loud bursts of conversations.

Ethan, Luke, and Ollie are talking about hockey. We have a home game in a couple nights that everyone is freaking out about. Apparently.

"Dude." Ethan shoves my shoulder and I blink up from my sandwich. "Are you listening?"

"No."

Luke rolls his eyes, and Ollie shoves an orange slice in his mouth.

"We asked if you think there'll be more fans at the games," Ethan says. "Since you're back from World Juniors."

"Maybe," I say. "I don't know."

Ethan makes an annoyed face at Luke and Ollie.

"He's just tired," Ollie says, nodding at me. "Cameron, you need more sleep."

"Tell me about it." I haven't been sleeping well.

Ethan goes on about the game, and I glance over my shoulder. Sam is sitting beside Trina, and they're pouring over a thick textbook, underlining and circling things. Trina's eyes catch mine and I turn back around.

I feel jittery all the time now. The word sits like a rock in my stomach. *Gay* . I don't even like saying it. How could I be that word? For Sam, it's so easy. I don't understand. It itches at my skin uncomfortably.

Luke is squinting at me, chewing on his sandwich slowly.

"What?" I ask.

"Okay, I'll just ask what we're all thinking here," he says, sighing. Ollie and Ethan are looking at him. "What was the deal with Matthew in the locker room a few days ago?"

Now all eyes are on me. I shrug. "It wasn't a big deal."

"Dude," says Luke. "You were... *crying* ."

I shrug again. "It was... I was tired. Just... some family stuff."

"We just want to make sure you're okay," says Ollie warmly.

"Yeah," chimes in Ethan, shoving my shoulder less aggressively than usual.

"I'm good," I say. "Just tired."

Am I good? I pick up my soggy sandwich wrap and take a bite.

~

Sam comes over and we study. His lips are so pink and his eyes are so blue and his freckles are so faint and his eyelashes are so long and the skin around his eye is still a faded shade of purple. I want to kiss him. But when he reaches out and touches my shoulder, I flinch. And then I don't want to kiss him.

"Cameron," says Sam softly after I've flinched for the third time. He pulls his hand away and tucks it into his sweatshirt sleeve. "What's wrong?"

My eyes flicker towards the closed door. Mom is on the phone, and her voice drifts through the thin walls.

Sam follows my gaze. "You want to tell her?"

I sigh. "I don't know. I don't think I ever want to tell her."

"Why not? I can be there with you, if you want. She was fine with me."

I make my eyes meet his. "It might be different this time," I say, and for some reason, my voice is a whisper. "It's different when it's your own son."

"Is it?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Sam's eyes widen.

"Sam, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"I know." Sam looks at his hands and bites his lip, a sigh running through his body. The fabric of his Harvard sweatshirt is so soft, I want to rub it between my fingers. I lean against my wall and tap my pen against the hard cover of my math textbook.

When he looks up, his eyes are pooling with something I can't read. "Do you want to come over for dinner?"

"Tonight?"

"I'm making eggs."

"Eggs?"

"It's the only thing I know how to cook." He half-smiles.

"You cook now?"

"Come over. You'll see."

"Okay. Sam..."

He studies me. "Yeah?"

I want to reach out and touch him, or kiss him, or something, but my arms are glued to my side. I can hear Mom laughing in the kitchen. The air in this house is like superglue now, and it sticks my limbs together and my thoughts together.

"Never mind." I try to smile. "Let's go."

We wave goodbye to Mom on the way out, but she pulls the phone away from her ear before we can slip out the front door. "Where are you off to?"

Sam smiles. "Cameron is coming over for dinner, if that's okay."

"Sure. Don't be back too late, Cameron."

"Yeah, Mom," I mumble, and we're out the door, and I exhale.

~

Sam's house is even messier than I remembered. Clothes are strung wildly across the living room, and old take-out boxes are stacked on the coffee table. Tom is sitting on the couch, and he glances at us as we walk through the front door.

"Hello Cameron," he says, his voice rough like sandpaper. He's wearing a flannel shirt and jeans, and his skin is tired and wrinkled. An NHL game plays quietly on the TV, two American teams that aren't very good. "How are you?"

"Good, thanks. How are you?" I ask, then glance from Tom to Sam. Should I have asked that? I've never talked to someone with cancer before.

"Never been better," says Tom, shifting his position on the sofa. He studies my face and rolls his eyes. "Did Sam tell you about the cancer?"

Sam opens his mouth. "Uncle -"

"Honestly, that boy is so dramatic. It's nothing. The doctors caught it early, everything will be fine." He shifts again, wincing slightly. Sam flushes beside me.

"I believe it," I say, stuffing my hands in my pockets. Tom smiles gruffly.

Sam grabs my arm. "We're studying," he says, and pulls me to his bedroom, even though I didn't even bring my backpack.

His bedroom is very organized. Much more like him. I sit on his bed, admiring the NASA posters hung on the walls, and notice the book I got him for Christmas sitting on his desk.

Sam sits beside me. "He hates sympathy," he says. "They caught it early, but I still worry. Should I worry? I think I should."

"I don't think you should worry." I take his hand, feeling the soft skin of his palm against mine, the way his warm fingers curl around mine.

"So *now* you hold my hand," says Sam, but he's smiling.

"Sorry."

"We should come to my house more often." The smile fades from his face. "I think you'll feel better once you tell your mom though, Cameron. I know you're anxious around the house now."

"It's okay."

"Really, Cam. She'll love you no matter what."

"Don't call me Cam."

Sam grins. "Cam and Sam. Get it?"

I shove him, but a smile is curling on my face. "Shut up. It's Cameron."

"I like it."

"I'm not a fan."

He laughs. "It'll be okay. You tell me not to worry, I tell you not to worry."

"Sure, Sam."

He stands up. "Come on, we have to go make dinner now."

"Okay, Chef."

I'll admit, he can make pretty good scrambled eggs. Not too milky, but just the right amount of fluffiness, and we eat them on the couch in front of the TV.

After we've eaten, Sam leans against my shoulder. My heartbeat spikes, but I don't flinch. That means something, right?

His body is so warm against mine, and I try to relax. I can smell the sweet shampoo he uses. Tom glances at us briefly before looking back to the game. How is it that some people care so much, and some people care so little?

All I know is that I like Sam. *Gay* . I'm not supposed to like Sam. But I like being here with him, and I don't know why.

Towards the end of third period, I think he's fallen asleep, but then he rubs his eyes and whispers, "Cameron."

"Yeah."

"I think you should tell your mom."

"I don't want to."

"I think you'll be happier."

Everyone has been talking about my happiness lately. Like it's something for concern.

"Fine," I whisper.

"When?"

"I don't know, Sam. Sunday."

"Sunday?"

"Go back to sleep."

His eyes flutter shut without complaint.

I like being here with him. But the word is hard to say.

A/N the next few days I'm going to the lake with my family, so I won't be writing then and probably won't have internet at all! It'll give me lots of time to think though, and I'll update ASAP :) also, thank you guys so much for commenting and voting and being overall super awesome!!

30

I don't go to church on Sunday. I tell Mom that Coach scheduled an extra hockey practice, but that's not true. I go to the neighborhood rink instead.

"Hi, Cameron!" says George when I walk in. His face splits into a wild smile, wrinkles creasing across his skin. "You played great at World Juniors, son."

"Thank you, George," I say, and I bit my lip. The last word hurts.

"We were all rooting for you here in St. Anne!"

"I really appreciate that."

George sets his broom against the wall and brushes his hands on his jacket. "So, are you here to practice? The rink is open for the next couple hours, figure skating lessons are later this afternoon."

"Actually, not today," I say, stuffing my hands in my coat pockets. "I didn't bring my stuff."

"Oh, really?"

"I thought I could just... you know..." I glance around the rink. "Hang out here for a bit. Do you need any help cleaning up or anything?"

George scratches his neck and thinks about it. "Do you want to dust the trophies?"

"Sure."

So that's what I do. George unlocks the trophy case in the wall and I dust all the old trophies and medals. Some go way back to the 50s and 60s. A couple trophies have my name on it.

It's just nice, to be in here. I'm stressed all the time now. My brain is always thinking so fast. Maybe that's how Sam feels, solving math equations. Except I'm trying to solve my life, and it's not as fun.

I mean, how bad can things be when you're inside the rink? Little kids find their passion here. I have good memories here. It's just safe. So I dust the trophies slowly and carefully, until the dull, faded metal is as shiny as it can possibly get.

When I'm done, I sit on the bench. The ice is smooth and glazed in front of me; no harsh blades have scraped against it yet today. When I was little, George let me ride on the Zamboni a couple times. See? Good memories.

George sits down slowly beside me. I know he's getting older. He winces as he bends his limbs a little. "Are you doing okay, Cameron? You seem tired."

"I'm okay. A bit tired."

"Is hockey burning you out?"

"No."

"School?"

"School is okay."

He clasps his hands together and looks out on the ice, a quiet sigh running through his body.

I clear my throat. "George?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm gay."

He glances at me. "Really?"

"Yeah." I said it. Out loud.

"A gay NHL player."

"Yeah."

George shakes his head and smiles slowly. "You sure are something. I'm proud of you, son."

Again. I stuff my hands deep in my pockets and stare at my shoes.

"If you need anything at all, you know where to find me."

I try to speak, but the words get stuck in my throat.

"Have you told your mother?"

I finally look up at him. "She's at church right now."

"I see. Give her a chance."

"Okay."

He ruffles my hair, like he used to do when I was little, and I bite my lip really hard.

I walk home. I feel so empty, for some reason. Light, cold snow is slowly falling from the sky. I feel like my insides have been turned to snow too.

~

For dinner, Mom makes lasagna. Sam offered to join us for dinner, but I said no. I said that it would be better if he wasn't here.

Everyone is talking too much and too loud at the dinner table and it hurts my head.

"I need poster board for science class!" Hailey says in almost a yell, shoving large forkfuls of lasagna in her mouth. Her legs are swinging above the ground.

"We'll get it for you later," says Mom, brushing a strand of hair behind her ears. Her eyes flicker to me. "So, Cameron. How was hockey practice today?"

"It was fine."

"Just fine?"

"Yeah."

Veronica dumps a pile of salad on her plate. "You're so quiet, Cameron."

"Yeah, Cameron!" shouts Hailey. "So quiet!"

Mom squints at me. "Are you sleeping okay, Cameron?"

"Alright."

"I heard you awake in the middle of the night last night," says Veronica. She raises her eyebrows innocently as I shoot her a look. "I'm just saying."

"Mom, I need poster board for science class!"

"I have to use the car tomorrow night." That's Veronica. "It's for a group project for my history class, we're meeting at Riley's house. Mom, you know Riley?"

"Riley Johnson?"

"Mom, no! Riley, she's the one with the eight siblings, remember? Brown hair?"

"Um..." Mom glances at my plate. Hailey's talking about her stupid poster board again. Utensils are clanking loudly against the silverware. "Cameron, are you not hungry? Eat the lasagna."

"Okay." I pick up my fork and poke at the food. I rest my chin on my hand. "Um, Mom, I'm gay."

Yeah, that makes everyone go quiet. Finally. All sets of eyes turn to me. Mom and Veronica are frozen, but Hailey continues to stab at her lasagna, her eyes wide as she shovels food in her mouth.

Veronica glances between Mom and I. She doesn't look quite as shocked. She runs a hand through her dark hair as her lips twist, trying to find the right words. "Cameron... okay. I mean, we still love you. Of course we love you. We want you to be yourself... right. Mom?"

Mom is just staring at me, her eyes almost glazed over in shock. I can't read her face. I can't read myself, either. Really, I can barely blame her. I feel frozen, too.

"Oh." That's the first thing she says, real quiet. Then, "Are you sure?"

"Um -"

"Was it... Sam?" I know what she means. Did Sam make me gay?

"No."

Mom licks her lips and shakes her head quickly. "I don't -" Then she pushes away from the table, the chair legs screeching on the floor, and walks down the hall into her bedroom. Her door clicks shut. Her plate is still sitting on the table, sad and unfinished.

I stand up, and Veronica does too. "Cameron," she says. Her green eyes are wide with fear. "Just give her time. She probably won't..."

"It's fine," I say. I walk to my bedroom, I think.

The last thing I hear before closing my door is Hailey exclaiming, "Veronica, what's happening?"

I flop on my bed. Do I not have any parents that love me? Is this how Sam feels? Or do I have it worse - mine are alive and they choose not to love me. Fuck, this hurts. It feels like someone physically scratched at my heart with their fingernail and just peeled it away. What was it? Was it the crosses hanging all over our house? Was that why my mother couldn't talk to me? I

stare at the Leafs poster on my ceiling as silent tears stain my quilt. Was I going to get kicked out or some shit? Or just ignored? Was it different when it was your own son, and not some neighbor? Do you know what some people do to gay people? Do you know how religious my family is? Do you know how shit like this would affect my career, my friendships, my family? I wish I didn't feel so empty. All these questions that I'm too empty to answer.

My phone vibrates on my desk, but I can't pick it up. I close my eyes. Everything is quiet. Time goes by, and soon I don't feel anything at all.

Someone creaks out my door but I'm too tired to open my eyes. "Cameron?" It's my mom's voice. "Do... you want to talk?"

I don't say anything. The bed squeaks and I know she's sitting on the edge.

"Cameron..." She sighs. "It's not that..."

"Are you mad at me?"

"Honey, no, I'm not mad." The bed springs groan again, and I open my eyes as my mom lays down beside me. Her light hair fans around her face, and she glances up to the Leafs poster. "I'm not mad."

"But you're disappointed."

"I - no -"

"I'm sorry." And then I squeeze my eyes shut as tears are leaking out faster. I didn't think I would care how my mom reacted. But I do. And fuck, this hurts worse than any physical fight.

"Shhh," she whispers. "Don't be sorry." Her warm fingers reach out and comb my hair, her soft hands on my cheek. " *I'm* sorry. This is just... a lot... to process."

"For me, too."

"I just want you to be happy, honey."

"I don't know how to be happy."

"Does... does Sam... make you happy?"

"I don't know."

"I just want you to be happy, Cameron. You know that, right?"

"What about religion?"

"You're my son."

Suddenly, I'm everyone's son today. The back of her knuckles are brushing away tears that slide down my cheeks.

"I don't know how to do this, Mom." I blink open my eyes and meet hers. She has grey hairs that are noticeable up close. It's hard to remember that she's still young, that she had Veronica and I when she was nineteen.

"Cameron," she says. "You're the strongest person I know."

"Veronica and Hailey are stronger than me."

"I love you, Cameron. You know that?"

Maybe I forgot. My mom and I haven't said that to each other in a long time.

"I'm sorry I wasn't... here for you. And I'm sorry if I don't always... understand. But... I'm..."

"It's okay, Mom," I say, and I let my eyes close again. I like laying here next to her, her warm hands on cheek, like we did when I was little.

I can breathe again. Is this what happiness feels like? Sam makes me happy.

A/N sorry for not updating as often, life has gotten busier the past couple weeks unfortunately! I'll write as often as I can :) lemme know what you think so far!! p.s., I'm writing this very late and I'm very tired so I'm sorry in advance for any typos lol

31

I race down the ice, pressing the puck against my stick. A large defender comes at me from the side, so I snap the puck towards Matthew as the defender slams me into the boards.

Matthew tips the puck into the net and the crowd goes crazy, tying the game at 2-2. It's hot in my jersey, and sweat makes my hair stick to my forehead under my helmet. I chew on my mouthguard and grin as Ollie slaps my helmet.

"Nice assist!" he shouts, though it's hard to hear. Fans bang against the clear wall and holler with excitement.

There's only ten minutes left of the game. My fingers tingle as the ref blows the whistle and we huddle for a time out.

Coach is pulling at his tie anxiously. "If we lose this game, we can say goodbye to a playoffs spot," he shouts. "We are a much better team than they are. We need to play an offensive game here, focus on getting the puck to the net..."

He goes on and I glance around the stands. Mom is here somewhere, wearing her Lions sweatshirt. So are Hailey, Veronica, and Sam.

The last couple days have been weird. But not bad. Just confusing. I shake my head as thoughts start to leak in my brain. I have to focus on hockey. Remember?

The game starts again, and all I think about is the sweet scent of sweat and the harsh sound of blades against ice, the cheering of the fans and the feel of the stick in my gloved hands, the layout of the opposing team and where to go. With three minutes left, I flick my wrist and the puck goes flying over the goalie's shoulder, burrowing itself in the top corner of the net. We win 3-2. Is this what happiness feels like?

In the locker room, I shower quickly and pull on warm sweatpants, a Lions t-shirt, and baseball hat. Ethan is rattling loudly beside me as he yanks on a sweatshirt.

"So Lacy and I got into a fight the other day, right? I don't know, something about me not paying enough attention to her. So I gave her flowers - is that not so fucking sweet of me? I know. Anyway. So today she came to the game, which I'm so glad of, 'cause I made some amazing saves. Like, the one in second period? When I reached out and just barely caught it - holy shit, that was a good one."

I stand up and swing my hockey bag around my shoulder. "Yeah, that was a really good one," I say. "And flowers are sweet."

"I know, right?" He grins and sits down on the bench, pulling on his running shoes.

"You have a ride home today?"

"Yeah, yeah, you told me."

"Alright. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you."

The locker room is mostly cleared out, with only a few players left, talking quietly. I'm almost to the door when a few reporters stop me.

"Great game, Cameron," says one of them. "Do you mind if we ask a couple quick questions?"

"Um..." I glance at the door. "Sure."

Tape recorders are held up. "How important was tonight's game?"

"A pretty important one." I stuff my hands in my pockets and bounce on my toes. "Um, but I think the team held up well under the pressure. We did what we had to do, which was... ultimately, win."

"What kind of position are the Lions in, heading towards the playoffs?"

"I think we're in a pretty good spot."

"And finally..." the one journalist smiles shyly. "Some fans are wondering about your personal life. Any relationships?"

"Um..." I shift my bag on my shoulder. "Yeah, I have a boyfriend." The words taste funny and something tightens on my heart.

The journalists stare at me silently, their eyes wide. Do they think I'm going to talk more?

"That's all," I say, and walk out the locker room door.

~

Sam is sitting in the passenger seat, and my hand is on the steering wheel, but the car isn't moving. I haven't pulled out of the parking lot yet.

"So. Boyfriend." He smiles. "I wasn't made aware of this new relationship status."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have said that without talking to you."

"No, it's okay. Cameron, I'm really proud of you."

I sigh. The car is so quiet and the air is so fragile. "I think I'm ruining my career." I didn't mean to whisper.

"No, you're not." Sam pulls his sweatshirt over his hands and smiles softly. "You're not ruining anything."

"I feel like I did something really, really bad."

"You didn't."

I glance out the car window. Downtown St. Anne is lit up against the dark sky, and wet snow is glazed over the pavement. "I'm sorry."

"Don't say that. You're always apologizing for things you don't need to."

I shrug and glance at him, at his blue eyes. "Your eye is looking better."

His fingers fly up to the face. The purple is really faded now. "I guess."

"Sam."

"Cameron."

"I don't want to screw up."

"Cameron, you're allowed to screw up." A car's headlights flash briefly through the window, and his freckles illuminate. "I screw up too."

"I feel like... things are about to fall apart."

"Me too. But they won't."

I rub my forehead. "I don't even know who I am."

"Me neither."

"So, we're fucked."

Sam laughs. "Yeah." He takes my hand.

I have a boyfriend. Is this what happiness feels like? I start the car.

~

Everyone is talking at school. I try not to listen. But it's hard.

"Faggot."

I shoot a glare towards the group of guys standing by the lockers, and my hands clench at my side. "Fuck you," I mutter.

The guys snicker. I think they're all on the baseball team. I wish I could fight them. But it's not just them. Everyone is turning to look at me, whispering. And I'm too tired to fight everyone.

"But I thought he was good at hockey."

"God doesn't approve of behavior like that."

"Shh, lower your voice."

"I sit behind him in French."

I unlock my locker. It takes me three tries. When I grab my textbook and turn around, I spot Ethan down the hallway. He walks toward me.

"Dude," he says loudly. People glance over their shoulders. "What the *fuck* ."

"Ethan..." Something in my heart sinks.

"I cannot *believe* this."

"I just -"

"How could you not have told me?" He looks hurt, and his dark eyes are heavy with confusion.

"What?"

"I thought you were my best friend. I can't believe I heard about this from the fucking *news* ."

"Oh."

"Yeah." He shakes his head and sighs deeply.

I could laugh. Or cry with relief. "I'm sorry. I *am* your best friend. It's just been hard."

"Jesus, man." He punches my shoulder and half-smiles. "You could've told me. I'm here for you, okay?"

"Okay," I say.

I think this would be a good moment for a bro-hug. But that's too gay.

Just kidding. Ethan hugs me.

I hear about it all through my classes. It's weird, having people talk about me and trying to analyze me and figure me out, when I don't have myself figured out at all. There are news reports and sports articles about it rolling in online that I don't really read.

"Thanks, Cameron." That's what Henry says to me in the hallway. He's smiling. I almost don't recognize him at first, the scrawny underclassman with the blond hair, the one that had the bloody nose way back in the fall.

Thanks? Thanks for what? I didn't do anything. And I still don't know what I'm supposed to do. No one wrote a fucking rule book.

I'm glad when the day is over. I drive Sam home. He probably didn't have a great day either, and he lets his eyes flutter shut in the passenger seat beside me. I breathe deeply as the windshield wipers squeak against the glass. *Yeah, I have a boyfriend.* Yeah, we're fucked. But aren't things always supposed work out in the end?

A/N hooraaaaay for writing cause I love this storyyyyy :)

32

"Cameron Beckett, who returned from World Juniors not too long ago with a gold medal around his neck, has just come out as *gay* ."

"That's right, Earl. Beckett is seventeen years old and plays for the St. Anne Lions, and is looking high on the rankings for the NHL draft picks this summer."

"Jim, he's obviously gifted at hockey. No doubt about that. But the question is, Is the NHL ready for an out, gay player?"

"You want to change the channel?"

I tear my eyes away from the television screen and look at Veronica. She's sprawled out across the couch, scrolling through her cell phone, but her wide eyes are focused on me.

"I don't know," I say.

"Switch to channel 54!" says Hailey, running from the kitchen and jumping on the couch. Her hair is in a messy ponytail, and she grins as she grabs the remote from the coffee table. A new show pops up on the television, two middle school kids that make witty comments as an audience laughs, and I exhale.

Veronica puts her phone down. "Cameron, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"Do you have practice tonight?"

"Yeah, I have practice tonight."

Hailey leans against my arm, her eyes still glued to the screen. "Cameron, are you okay?"

"Yeah, everyone, I'm fine." Jesus.

I'd rather sleep or watch an old movie or something than go to practice, but with Coach getting more intense and the games getting harder, I need to be there. I push myself up from the couch and Hailey flops to her side.

"Drive safe, Cam," says Veronica, all serious.

What the hell is happening to my family? "'K, Ronny."

She makes a face. She hates that nickname like I hate mine.

"When Mom gets home, tell her I'll be home from practice later tonight. Coach is making everyone stay late."

"Okay," she says. Her eyes follow me until I grab the car keys and I'm out the door.

In the car, Ethan turns on the 80s station and sings under his breath, tapping on the dashboard in time with the beat. At least there some things that are normal.

~

When I walk in the locker room, the quiet murmur of chatter turns to dead silence.

I sling my bag to the ground and glance around at my teammates. Eyes blink at me, hands frozen at the bottom of shirts like they're afraid to get undressed. "Um..." My breathing gets tight.

"What are you guys staring at? The kid is gay, we get it. He's still the best fucking player there is, so put your jerseys on." Matthew slams his locker shut for emphasis. Thank god for Matthew. Who knew I would be saying that?

"It's just fucking gross." Luke Chan's voice is deadly as he throws a harsh glare at me from across the room, and all eyes shift to him. "I didn't know we had a fag on our team."

"Luke, don't say that," says Ollie quietly beside him. "Cameron is our friend."

"I'm not friends with him anymore."

Okay, ouch. It's not like Luke and I have ever been best friends, but I thought we were cool.

"Shut up, Luke," Ethan says coldly.

Luke shakes his head, his face contorted with ugly anger. "It makes me sick. Come on, I know I'm not the only one here."

"Don't be a little shit," says Matthew. "You think this team really needs you on it?"

"Yeah, it does," says Luke. "I don't go making out with other dudes, so there's a plus."

"I'm on the team." Finally, found my voice. Everyone's head swivels back to me. "I'm the co-captain of this team, actually. I'm here to play hockey. If you're not, get out."

Luke scowls. "Yeah, right," he mutters under his breath, breaking his stare with me and turning back to his locker. "You deserve a concussion and more, just like that other fag that you've been spending all your time with..."

I don't really remember going after him. It all goes kinda blurry, and I'm just grabbing for his skin and I don't stop when I see blood. And then Ethan and Ollie are pulling me back, and I'm crying.

"Fuck you," I say, but my body is shaking and sobs are choking out of me and it hurts to breathe, and I'm trying to pull out of my teammate's tight grasps.

Luke is bending over, catching blood that drips down from his nose. "Whatever," he spits, dangerously quiet, and marches out of the locker room. The door slams shut and everyone goes quiet again, except for my shaky breathing. Things hurt a lot.

"Don't listen to him," says Ethan. He runs a hand through his hair. "What a... jerk."

"Yeah," says Ollie softly. "We don't care that you're gay, Cameron. It's okay."

People chime in quietly. I press my hand to my forehead. "Let's just go to practice," I say.

~

Sam presses an ice pack against my eye and I wince. "We're matching."

"Jesus, this is cold. Sam, everyone sucks."

"I don't suck."

"Yeah, you don't suck."

He pulls the ice pack away. "I'm sorry Luke said that."

I didn't tell him everything, though. Just enough.

"I thought you two were friends."

"Well, apparently not." I touch the tender skin under my eye and bite my lip as pain blossoms underneath my fingertips. "Anyway, I knew some people would get mad." And honestly, thinking about it, I feel like Luke has always hated me a little.

He leans into my shoulder and I pull my arm around him, and his body is warm against my chest. He breathes deeply. "Things are gonna work out."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Do you wanna watch a movie or something?"

"Yeah."

But we don't move from my bed, and I breathe into his hair.

33

After about a week, things seem to die down a little. Coach suspends Luke from the team. Coach doesn't care less about this "media bullshit", and says at long as I'm playing good hockey, nothing else matters.

Sam comes over and we study. Or really, he reads *War and Peace* out loud as I flip through old comic books. It's finally starting to get warmer outside, and the snow is mushy and glistening under the sun.

We walk around the neighborhood. We watch old movies. I don't know how to do this. I feel like there's so much pressure on me all the time. I don't know how to do this?

"We can know only that we know nothing," says Sam, his eyes flickering quickly across the pages. His voice is soft and woven. "And that is the highest degree of human wisdom."

I'm sitting beside him on the floor, our backs against my bed. I turn my baseball over in my hand, feeling the worn leather under my fingertips. "Deep."

"Yeah, deep."

"Tolstoy might know what he's talking about."

"Maybe." Sam shuts the book gently and pulls it in towards his chest, stretching out his legs. "Anyway. What's for dinner?"

"What, you want to make eggs for everyone?"

"Funny."

"I think we're ordering Chinese."

"Alright."

I glance sideways at him. He's looking down at the book. His eyelashes are long, and his hands are tucked in the sleeves of his green sweatshirt.

"How's your uncle?"

Sam picks at the corner of the pages. "He's okay. He's been going to the doctor twice a week."

"He'll be okay."

"Yeah, he'll be okay." I don't know if he means it.

My phone buzzes on my desk, and I reach over and grab it. It's an email from school.

"Beckett, Cameron exam grades," I read out loud. Shit. I forgot about exams. I unlock my phone and read the rest of the email, random sentences of information jumping quickly into my brain.

"Pre-calculus..." I squint at the screen, then look up at Sam. "B-?"

Sam's eyes widen with happiness, and a smile curls across his face. "A B-?"

"This can't be right." I push the phone in Sam's hands, and he reads it for himself.

"Cameron!" he says, laughing. "You got a B- in math."

"I got a B- in math?"

"You got a B- in math."

"Shut up."

He laughs again. I love it when he laughs. "That's amazing," he says.

I smile. "Well, I had a good teacher."

Maybe I should kiss him. I want to more often than I do. But sometimes, I don't want to at all. I don't know how to do this. I still feel wrong sometimes. Does that make me a bad person?

~

After dinner, he and Hailey take the telescope out for the first time. The sky is clear and scattered with bright stars, and satellites wink down. I do homework in the kitchen, but even from there I can hear their muffled laughter. I glance up, and out the window I can see Sam kneeling beside Hailey, pointing to the sky. I smile, a little.

~

In the hallway the next day at school, someone is standing by my locker as I slam it shut.

"Hi, Trina."

"Hello, Cameron," Trina says cooly. She adjusts her glasses and flips a strand of straight, black hair over her shoulder. "Um, I heard you and Sam were... dating."

"Yeah. Sorry, am I distracting him?"

I didn't think it was possible for Trina to blush, but she does, a little. She clears her throat. "I'm, uh, sorry about that."

Now I feel bad. "It's okay. What's up?"

"I just wanted to say... I'm glad Sam's happy. And he's happy when he talks about you, so."

"Sam talks about me?"

"I still think he should be focusing on his studies right now, but... I mean, with all the universities shoving scholarships down his throat, I guess it's good that he's having fun."

I shift my heavy stack of textbooks in my arms. "Like, the University of Toronto?"

Trina raises an eyebrow. Shit, she is so much better than me at that. "That was just one."

"There are more?"

"Yeah." Someone calls her name from down the hallway, and she glances over her shoulder.

"I gotta go," she says, turning back to me. "I'll see you around, Cameron."

She marches off before I can reply, her flats clicking loudly on the floor. I watch her walk away until the crowd of students block my view.

~

"Hey, Sam."

"Cameron!" His voice is pleasantly surprised on the other end of the line. "What's up?"

"Where are you right now?"

"I'm at school, setting up for astronomy club. Why?"

"Just wondering." I'm lying on my bed, tossing my baseball lazily into the air, pressing my phone against my ear. "I was just curious... Trina said something to me today about you getting a lot of scholarships."

There's a crackle that spits through the phone speakers, and I wince.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said, Trina talked to me today about scholarships that you're getting."

"Oh. Cameron, I'm kinda busy right now. Can I call you back later?"

"I didn't realize all these universities were contacting you."

"Does it matter?"

"I don't know, does it?"

There's a long silence, and Sam sighs. "I'm not going to take them."

I sit up. *"Sam."*

"Cameron, I'm gonna call you back."

"Sam. Wait."

"I need to be here for my uncle."

"What about NASA?"

"That can wait."

"Sam..."

"Cameron, you don't understand."

"Explain it to me, then."

"Tom is all I have left. I can't just leave him."

"I'm here for you, too."

"Yeah, but soon you'll be in a different city with the NHL."

I'm pressing the phone tightly against my ear, struggling to find the right words. "Sam."

"I'll call you later."

He hangs up.

He doesn't call me back later.

After dinner, I walk over to his house with my hands in my pockets. Melting snow crunches underneath my boots. I knock quietly, and it's over a minute before Sam swings the door open. His eyes are sad and his cheeks are flushed.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm sorry, Sam."

"It's okay."

"I just want what's best for you."

"Okay."

"But I know you're going through a lot. I'll support you if you don't take the scholarships."

His face crumbles slightly, I put my hands on his cheeks and kiss him, pulling him closer. I don't know how to do this, okay? Sam is so smart and I don't want him to do something stupid. But I like it when he laughs, and I like it when he's happy.

A/N okay now we actually might be nearing the end a bit. I do not know how to pace stories people lol. I don't want this to be too short or two long! comment your thoughts

34

I rub my face and yawn loudly, shuffling into the kitchen.

"'Morning," I say, sitting down beside Veronica at the table. The sky outside is just beginning to lighten, a faint shade of dark blue. "Can you pass me the cereal box?"

"Look at all this, Cameron," says Mom, who's leaning over the kitchen counter, going through the mail. She's still in her robe and slippers. "There's a lot of letters here for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Fan mail," mumbles Veronica, but her eyes are barely open and her head is propped up by her hand.

"Let me see," I say.

Mom hands me the stack of letters - at least six or seven - and I glance through the addresses.

"A couple from Ontario. One from Quebec, Alberta, B.C... two from the States..." I flip over one of the envelopes, a pale blue color scrawled over with messy handwriting. There's a rainbow sticker on the back.

Veronica narrows her eyes. "Well? Open them."

"I will later," I say.

Mom leans against the table, holding her coffee mug with two hands. "Just open them, Cameron."

"I will later."

"They're from fans, probably," says Veronica.

"I *know* . I said I will *later* ."

Veronica and Mom exchange a look. I go to my bedroom to get changed. Is it so bad I don't want to open the letters right now? I run a finger over the rainbow sticker, faded and frayed along the edges, and stick the letters in my desk drawer.

~

"I don't know," I say to Sam later, twisting a plastic fork in my fingers. "I don't know. Is it difficult for you?"

Sam tucks his hands in his sweatshirt sleeves and shrugs, a blush spreading across his cheeks. "I don't think so. But not everyone is the same, Cameron."

I set the fork down and sit on my hands, glancing around the cafeteria. Some days, Sam and I sit together now. That's new. I like it.

"Coach says I should release an official statement. That I'm... you know, before the NHL draft picks. Just so it's... official."

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know."

His eyes flicker around my face, and he smiles softly. "You don't have to do anything. There isn't any pressure."

"But there *is* pressure. A lot of people are watching me, Sam. I got fan letters."

"What'd they say?"

"I didn't open them. I don't know how -" Three chatty girls walk past our table and I clear my throat, my eyes following them until they've passed. I lower my voice. "I can't be, like, a gay role model for all these people. I don't know how to do that. I don't even know who I am."

"You don't have to be perfect. You just have to be... yourself. That's what everyone wants, to be themselves. That's the thing."

"Maybe." I watch as Sam takes a bite out of his sandwich.

"Besides," he says. "Everyone is here to support you."

"Not everyone." I look over Sam's shoulder to the baseball team's table. A couple of the players are glancing over at us and grinning.

"A lot of people," says Sam. "It'll work out, Cam."

"Cameron."

He laughs. "C'mon."

"Don't do this to me." I'm smiling.

He takes another bite of his sandwich. "Besides, you still have to teach me hockey."

"Teach you hockey?"

"Yeah. I haven't played in forever. I don't remember."

I grin. "Fine."

"That took a lot of convincing."

"You know, I liked you better when you were smart instead of sarcastic."

He laughs again, and I smile. But I still feel bad, for some reason, and I'm not hungry. Because Sam is gay, and smart, and kind, and I don't know what I am. I'm good at hockey? And I want to kiss Sam. And everyone expects me to be more than that.

~

As I walk outside the locker room, Coach slaps my shoulder so hard my knees nearly buckle.

"Beckett," he says. "A word?"

We step to the side as my teammates walk past us, shooting us brief glances. But I mean, c'mon, it's not like he hasn't yelled at me before.

"Coach," I say.

"Alright, I'll give it to you straight," he says, pulling at his tie. "The press wants something from you. An interview, whatever."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"Kid, I'm not going to be the one to pressure you. But this might be a good decision, career-wise. Everyone up top is wondering why you're creating such a buzz. You just have to let them know it's not for a bad reason."

I open my mouth to say something, then bite my lip instead.

"Beckett. If you're worried about your future with the NHL, it's secure. All the teams that want you, they don't care who you're making out with."

Oh, Jesus. I blush like Sam does.

"I'm just saying. I'm just saying, okay?" He twists his mouth and glances at his watch, then back to me. "Alright? You hear me?"

"Yes, Coach."

He slaps my shoulder again. "Okay, now forget all that shit. We have a game against the IceDogs this weekend, and you know that goalie is good."

"Yeah."

But I don't forget all that shit. I think about it all through practice.

~

I would talk to Sam about it, but then he gets the flu.

A/N I already wrote the next chapter, I'll post it in a few hours so keep an eye out for it!!

35

Mom makes a ton of chicken noodle soup and I bring it over in a thermos. He has a high fever. When I'm not at practice, I go over to his house - his uncle's medicine makes him tired, so Tom is asleep most of the time. And I don't want Sam to be sick alone.

The third time I walk through the front door, a warm thermostat in my hands again, Sam is screaming. And I freeze.

"Tom," I say in a hoarse voice, but Tom is asleep on the couch. I set the thermostat down and walk to Sam's bedroom, and my muscles are all tingly and cold.

I swing open the door. "Sam," I say, my voice catching in my throat. "Sam, it's okay. Wake up."

He's curled up on his side, drenched in sweat, kicking away at the blankets. His face is flushed and there are tears on his cheeks, and his light hair is messy against the pale pillows.

"Wake up, Sam," I say, trying to stay calm even though I'm panicked. "You're okay."

He cries out again in his sleep, and I sit on the chair beside his bed, chewing on my fingernails. What haunts Sam Hughes?

"You're okay," I keep saying. "Sam. Sam? It's me, Cameron."

He thrashes under the thin sheets. "Please!" he screams, his voice cracking and desperate.

"Wake up, Sam. You're okay. It's just me, Cameron. This is a bad dream. You're okay."

His eyes open but he's still crying, and his shoulders are shaking with sobs. "Cameron."

I sigh with jittery relief. "You're okay, you're okay, you just had a bad dream. You're okay, Sam."

"I had a bad dream."

"I know."

I rub my face. I don't know why my hands are trembling. "I brought you chicken noodle soup again, Sam."

He doesn't answer, and when I look back up, his eyes are closed, and his chest is rising and falling unsteadily under the blankets. In the bathroom, I run a cloth under cold water and press it against his forehead. His mouth twitches and he shifts in the bed fitfully, but he doesn't wake up.

When I was younger, my mom used to do that. Press a cold cloth to my forehead. Or maybe it was my dad.

I sit back down on the chair and chew my fingernails, and don't move in case the nightmares come back. What haunts Sam Hughes?

~

That was the worst night. After that things get better, and his temperature slowly begins to drop. I read *War and Peace* out loud, even though I can't read as well as him and I stumble over the hard words. Sometimes he falls asleep as I'm reading to him.

I bring my homework and do it in his room. He tries to help but I won't let him. After a couple days, he can eat food besides broth again without throwing up. I bring Mom's old laptop and we watch old movies. We rewatch our favorites. I don't like to leave him.

After almost a week, his temperature is officially back to normal and he feels fine. I kiss him so hard.

"You scared me," I say.

"I'm okay, Cam."

"Do you always have bad dreams?"

"Sometimes," he says, but his eyes pool with sadness, and I hug him really tight and breathe into his soft sweatshirt and I don't let go for a very long time.

~

It's a Friday night when Veronica takes Hailey out to the movies for some sister bonding. And Sam is back at astrology club, or whatever. So that leaves Mom and I are alone at the house, watching an NHL game. I know I don't have a life, okay?

During intermission as a car commercial starts playing, Mom sighs deeply and turns to me. She's curled up on the couch with her face in her shoulder. "I'm worried about you, Cameron."

Jesus. "Mom, I'm going to get a snack."

"Cameron, are you doing okay? You've been so quiet the past couple weeks."

"I'm always quiet."

Mom pulls her hair up in a ponytail and bites her lip. "Do you want to... see someone?"

"See... like a therapist? Mom, no!"

"You want to talk to Father John?"

"You want me to talk to a *priest* ?"

"Will you go to church on Sunday with us, at least?"

I lean my head against the itchy fabric of the sofa, wishing the game would pop back up on the screen right about now. "I think I'm busy then, Mom."

"I'm worried about you."

"I've heard."

"You can talk to me about... things."

"Okay, Mom."

She gives up talking. The game comes back on.

~

Dear Cameron,

My name is Riley (even though I'm a boy, my mom gave me the worst name so sometimes I go by Ri or Rye except no one really calls me that) and I am gay and I like to play hockey and soccer. It makes me happy that you're such a good hockey player. And that you have a boyfriend, that is cool. I hope you are drafted to the Flames because that's my hometown, good luck Cameron I am rooting for you.

Riley Peterson

That night, I don't sleep at all.

What haunts Cameron Beckett?

A/N question: what do you think sam was dreaming about? sam&cam are such complex characters I just alkjfjkslkjf

p.s. I have another chapter already written (!!!) should I update tonight or hang onto it for tomorrow? I don't like hanging onto things lol i want you guys to read it

36

Someone touches my shoulder, and I jolt up so fast I slam my hand on the table.

"Ow," I mutter, blinking my vision into focus. The lights are so bright, and people are snickering quietly around me.

"Mr. Beckett, I would appreciate it if you stayed with the class." Mrs. Godfrey raises her eyebrows at me. "I don't want to keep asking this."

"Sorry," I murmur, rubbing my eyes. She makes her way back to the front of the classroom, her shoes clicking on the floor.

"Now, if we're all together, let's get back to the periodicity identities. Please look at problem number forty-two..."

The loud noise of papers shuffling makes me wince, and I glance at Ethan.

"Dude," he whispers. "That's like, the fourth time this week you've fallen asleep."

"I haven't been sleeping well."

"I mean, I'm all for taking naps in class, but Mrs. Godfrey is gonna kill you."

I blink quickly and try to focus on the whiteboard, small numbers scrawled messily in pale colors. Equations start to swim and I look back at Ethan.

"It's fine," I say.

His eyes narrow in concern. "Dude, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes!"

Mrs. Godfrey glares at us and we sit up straighter, staring down at our worksheet. After a moment, Ethan clears his throat and whispers quietly, "Why don't you go to the nurse or something? They let people nap in there."

"I'm fine."

I don't make eye contact with him again until class is over, and he drops it.

~

You think I wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Stupid.

That's how I end up doubled over in the boards with the wind knocked out of me.

"Cameron?" Ollie Johnson's voice is scared beside me. "Are you okay? I thought you saw me, I just -"

Matthew skates up. "What happened?"

Ethan shakes his head and storms out of the net. "Cameron Beckett, I swear to fucking god -"

"I'm fine," I say, blinking quickly as my vision blurs. Blue jerseys double themselves then go back to one. "I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention. You guys, it's fine."

Coach's voice echoes from the other side of the rink. "Beckett, you're gonna get yourself killed!"

"I'm sorry!" I say. "I'm sorry, I was just out of it for a second."

"You were sleeping again," says Ethan. "Wake the fuck up, man! We have a game tomorrow, and there are some big guys that will smash into you way harder than that."

"I'll be awake," I mumble, and wince.

"Jesus," mutters Ethan.

I lean against the board and rub my eyes through the facemask of my helmet. "I'm awake, I'm awake."

"Do you need to see the trainer?" asks Matthew. Ethan nods beside him.

"No."

Ethan waves a gloved hand in front of my face. "Dude, are you gonna pass out?"

"Ethan, stop!"

"Beckett," says Matthew through gritted teeth. "We have a big game tomorrow. We'd rather you go to the trainers now than in the middle of the game."

I close my eyes. "Fine."

"Thank you!" says Ethan dramatically.

The entire team watches me skate off the ice. Coach sighs sharply as I walk past him.

Down the hallway, I lean against the doorway to Mitch's office. "Hi, Mitch."

Mitch is the second trainer, a younger guy, and everyone likes him way better than the other one. He glances over his shoulder and smiles at me. "Cameron! What's up?"

"Um, my team made me come here."

"Any injuries? The ankle still hurting?"

"No."

He waits for me to keep talking. On his desk, there are pictures of a baby girl.

"Um, I kinda dozed off on the ice, and everyone freaked out. Not that - I mean, it wasn't that big of a deal, I've just been tired lately."

"Have you been sleeping consistently?"

"Um, no."

"Any specific reason?"

I glance up towards the ceiling like I'm thinking about it and shake my head. "No."

"Cameron..." Mitch sighs. "I'm not a doctor, obviously, so I can't prescribe anything. But I can't pretend not to know what's been going on with you."

"Nothing has been..." I lean against the wall as they feel like they're closing. I hate how everyone knows everything. Everyone assumes things, too. "Like..."

"Cameron, you may be feeling anxiety. Have you ever had anxiety before?"

Again, look to the ceiling, pretend to think. "No."

"Alright. Well, if you need to nap here for now, you can."

"I'd rather go back to practice."

Mitch chews his lip and runs a hand over his stubbled chin. "I'll call your mom later, okay?"

"No! I mean, no. She's already worried about me. I'm so tired, I know I'll sleep tonight."

"Cameron."

"Mitch," I say, mimicking his worried adult voice. "I'll come back later if I'm still feeling weird, okay?"

Mitch chews on his lip for another moment, then sighs. "Alright."

"Alright. See ya."

I take a breath as I head back to the ice. The rest of practice goes fine. See? Everything is fine.

~

"Hey." Sam's voice is sleepy.

I press the phone against my ear as I try to get comfortable on the pillows. "Hey."

"What's up?"

"Nothing much. You?"

"Studying. I have a lot of organic Chemistry work to make up for being sick."

"Nerd."

I can't see him, but I know he's smiling. I glance up at the Maple Leafs poster on my ceiling, which is doused in darkness and pale moonlight.

"Anyway," I say. "I was just... calling."

"Just to say hi?"

"Yeah, just to say hi."

"Can you not sleep?"

I shrug, then remember he can't see me. "Uh, no."

He sighs, and it crackles through the phone speaker. "Me neither. I've been having the same dream over and over."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

There's a pause. "Not really."

"That's okay."

The guy who's scared to sleep and the guy who can't sleep at all. Oh, Jesus.

"Anyway," I say again, and clear my throat. "Um... if you're interested, you want to tell me about periodicity identities?"

"Are you trying to seduce me with math equations?"

"Shut up," I say, my face flaming. I'm smiling, though.

"Just kidding. Sure. You use periodicity identities to illustrate the shifting of a graph. Or you can use them to simplify expressions, I guess it depends. Because adding or subtracting radians gives you a new angle, but in the same position, you have to..."

I let my eyes shut, Sam's voice in my ear. I think I end up falling asleep. See? Everything is fine.

A/N 3 updates in one day? I'm just too good ;) thoughts on this chapter?

37

I lean against Sam's shoulder as I turn my baseball over in my hand.

"Dear Cameron," he reads. "My name is Ashley, and I am a twelve year old girl that lives only an hour away from St. Anne, so I've been to one of your games before, and also I have a St. Anne Lions baseball hat that I wear all the time. I have two moms and we're all really big fans of you, they said to say hello. I hope you win. I would come to all of your games if I could. Love, Ashley."

"Hmm," I say.

"Hmm," Sam says. "That was sweet. Look, she drew a picture. Want to read another?"

"No."

He gently rips open another envelope. Three more came in the mail this week. "Dear Cameron, I've been struggling with being gay for quite some time now, I even considered taking my own life, but you're a really big inspiration and I -"

"Stop."

He puts the letter down. "You okay?"

"Yup."

He folds it up and and sets it on my nightstand. "You want to take a walk?"

"They're calling for a bad snowstorm." The last blizzard of the year, is what the weatherman said.

"Cameron," he says softly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You want to talk?"

"No, I do not want to talk." I don't want to move, either.

"Cam."

"It's Cameron."

"Cameron. You -"

My bedroom door swings open and I lift my head from Sam's shoulder, even though it's just Hailey, and she doesn't care.

"Hi Sam," says Hailey. She runs and jumps on his lap. "Do you want to use the telescope with me again tonight?"

"I don't know about tonight," says Sam gently. "It's supposed to storm."

"It's supposed to storm?"

"I don't know, ask your brother. He's the meteorologist."

Hailey turns to me, her eyes wide. A string of blonde hair falls down the side of her face. "You're a meter-olo-gist?"

"Nope. Still a hockey player."

"Too bad, Cameron." Hailey pushes herself down from Sam and jumps to the floor.

"Yeah, too bad."

"Mom wanted me to tell you that we're watching a movie together as a family."

"What movie?"

"I don't know. Something old. She says hurry up or else you're gonna miss it."

"Alright," I mutter, glancing at Sam. Hailey runs from the room, her loud stomps echoing throughout the house, and Sam squeezes my hand.

We watch the movie. It does storm, and the wind howls against the windowpanes.

~

I take a deep breath, pressing a hand against my rib cage. It'll bruise. Everyone changes out of their jerseys around me, talking quietly as lockers slam shut. We won against the IceDogs in overtime.

Ethan sits on the bench beside me, wearing soft sweatpants and a bright white t-shirt against his dark skin. "Are you ever gonna change out of your jersey?"

"Yeah."

He glances to my hand. "Dude."

"Dude," I mimic. "Before you say anything, I was awake. It was just a normal check. Stop worrying all the time, Mom."

He holds up his hands in mock surrender. "Did I say anything?"

I sigh and take off my jersey, and pull on a Lions long-sleeved shirt. Ethan looks down to the bruise.

"Ouch," he says.

"It's hockey. Stop."

"I'm just saying. Are you like, sick or something?"

"No."

"Well, why have you been so tired? And like, weird?"

"Can you chill, Ethan?" I stand up and swing my bag over my shoulder. "Come on, let's go."

He puts on 80s music in the car but doesn't sing along.

~

Dear Cameron,

I am thirteen and I really like watching you play hockey, I am bisexual but I haven't told very many people yet, anyways I really like hockey and you seem like a nice person, thanks for like representing us.

From, Jake

There's a doodle of a hockey stick and puck beside his name. I lean against my bedroom wall and bite off the cap of a pen.

Dear Jake,

My blue pen hovers above the notebook paper. My breathing gets sharper. What am I supposed to say? I'm about to crumble up the paper, but then I stop and smooth it out.

Thank you so much for the letter. I'm glad you like hockey.

Then I really do crumble it up and throw it in the trash can. Besides, my handwriting is crap.

~

Sam's uncle goes to the hospital for checkups more often now. I know Sam is really worried about it. Maybe that's what he dreams about.

I'd like to think that once I'm playing for an NHL team, things will be easier. No high school, for one. But Sam and I won't be in the same city

anymore. And it hurts too much to think about that, so I don't. And hate is universal. And confusion is universal.

I wish I could write back to all those people. But there are words inside of me that I don't know how to pull out.

All weekend, it rains.

I wish it would rain forever.

38

"George," I announce, leaning against the wall. "I think something's wrong with me."

George continues sweeping the floor, but looks up at me with a concerned look on his face. There's a hockey lesson going on on the ice, and the kids look to be about four or five years old.

"What do you mean?" asks George. He's wearing his black rain jacket. I'm not sure if I've ever seen him in anything else.

"I don't know."

"Hey, talk to me."

Yeah, talking. I haven't been very good at that lately. "I don't know."

George sets the broom against the bleachers and leans against the wall beside me. He sighs deeply, and I look out at the little kids, flailing around on the ice. When he finally talks, his voice is warm. "You're under a lot of pressure right now."

"I guess."

He waits for me to talk. God, talking is so hard. All the words are stuck inside of me.

"I can't sleep," I finally say. "There are lots of people talking about me. You know, online and stuff."

"Hmm."

"And... like, writing to me."

"Writing to you?"

"Yeah, like letters."

"I see."

"Most of them are really nice. One person said they almost killed themselves, but I like, gave them hope. But I don't... I can't be..." I stare at the ground.

"Most of them?"

"Well, a couple haven't been nice."

But I don't show Sam those. I don't show anybody those.

"I see."

"And everyone either loves me or hates me. And I don't like either. I just want to play hockey, you know? I didn't want..."

"I know. It's a lot."

"Yeah." I sniff and stuff my hands in my pockets. "And I've just been really... anxious. And stressed."

"Why can't you sleep at night?"

"I don't know. My brain won't turn off."

George breathes deeply, and I bite my lip. I hate my brain at night. Sam getting beat up. Words ringing in my ear. People committing suicide. My father. My father?

"And I want to do the right thing. But I don't know what to do. I don't want to make a mistake."

"Cameron."

"And everyone's like, watching me. Um. And I just - I want to be a good person." I bite my lip again.

"Cameron. You are a good person."

"But I don't know what to do."

"You're only seventeen."

"Almost eighteen."

George smiles. "Almost eighteen. Cameron... I don't want you to be stressed like this. You don't need to be. So many people are rooting for you. And not in a... pressuring way. We just enjoy seeing the young man that you are becoming."

"Not everyone," I whisper.

"Not everyone."

"I'm gay." I stuff my hands deeper in my pockets and blink at my running shoes. "Shit, George. This is so hard."

"I'm here for you. Your family's here. Sam is here."

"But in a few months, I'll be moving away, probably. To whichever team drafts me. Then what? I'll have no one there, I won't know who I am..."

"You can call me anytime."

"You don't have a cell phone."

He looks shocked. "On my landline!"

"George."

"Cameron, you're such a good kid. I support you. So many people do. It takes courage to do things like this, but... I know you can do it."

"First gay NHL player."

"First gay NHL player."

I blink up towards the ceiling so tears don't leak out, but it doesn't work. "I guess I will be."

"I'm really proud of you. Okay?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Okay."

"Really, really proud of you, son."

George. George, George, George, George, George. That George. Always knows the right things to say.

~

Ethan slides in the passenger seat and studies my face. "You don't look dead."

"I guess."

"Finally." He slams the door shut and cranks up the heating. "You know, it's really not been fun having to be friends with the zombie."

"Sorry."

"Are you actually awake now?"

"I guess so."

"Did you actually sleep last night?"

"Uh, yeah."

He punches my shoulder and grins. "Cameron Beckett is back."

That's a nice thought. I drive the car and hum 80s songs with Ethan.

~

"Hey, Coach?"

He's looking down at his clipboard, scribbling loudly with a red pen. "Yeah?"

"I'll do an interview."

His hand freezes and he glances up. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"TSN has called me a few times. I kept putting them off."

"Okay."

"You want me to call them back?"

"Sure."

He sets the pen down on his clipboard. "I can do that."

"Alright."

He squints at me. "You okay, Beckett?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

If not, I guess I'm really good at pretending.

~

Dear Jake,

Thank you so much for the letter. I really appreciate it. It's okay if you haven't told very many people yet, I completely understand. As long as you're being yourself, that's all that matters.

From, Cameron Beckett

I put it in the mailbox.

~

Sam comes over and we watch an old movie. Mom, Veronica, and Hailey are all out somewhere, and he leans against my chest. His hair smells like sweet soap.

"It's almost spring time," he says sleepily. He tucks his hands in the sleeves of his Harvard sweatshirt.

"Yeah."

"Everything is better in the spring."

"Is it?"

He smiles. "There are lots of good constellations in the spring."

"Are there?"

"Planets shifting into rotation, too."

"You'll have to show me."

"Alright. You'll have to teach me hockey."

"Alright."

"Cameron, what's your favorite planet?"

"I don't know. Earth?"

"Why?"

"You're here."

I don't know why I said that. Sam grins and blushes.

"I didn't know you were so sweet."

"Shut up."

He laughs, and I smile.

I just like being here with him. Okay?

A/N I know I'm publishing really fast I'm sorry lol! Next week I'll be a lot busier, so I've just been writing as much as possible this week. Plus we're nearing the end a little bit, so... anyway, thank you so much for all the votes and comments!! This book reached #222 in teen fic yesterday which is crazy aaahhh! :)

39

"Good evening, I'm Tara Walkers here with your evening sports report. Today we are speaking with Cameron Beckett, a rising star in the hockey world and high on the rankings for NHL draft pick."

I try not to fidget in my suit. There are lights and cameras shining around the studio, and Tara Walkers is smiling broadly at the camera. Blonde, wavy hair falls past her shoulders.

"So, Cameron," says Tara, glancing at me and smiling. I know Mom is standing in the studio somewhere, but it's too dark past the lights to see anything. "Thanks so much for joining us this evening."

"Of course."

"You're a captain on the St. Anne Lions, the leading CHL player in terms of points, and finishing up your last year of high school. Has this been a lot?"

"Um, yeah," I say, fighting to keep my voice calm. It's not like people across the country are watching this or anything. Did Sam learn his sarcasm from me? "It's a lot, but hockey is something that I love, so I'm so thankful I have the opportunity to do this."

I glance briefly to the screen behind Tara. They're showing clips of me scoring.

"Now, Cameron," says Tara. "There have been different reports swirling around about your sexuality that you wanted to clear up today..." She raises her eyebrows at me and nods.

"Yes." I clear my throat and crack my knuckles. "Um, I am gay. Um... that doesn't change the way I play hockey, or the way I treat my teammates, or anything, obviously... but... yeah."

"So once you are drafted for the NHL, you'll be the first out, gay player. Is that a lot for you to take on?"

"Um, yeah, definitely." I try to smile. "But..."

"It's who you are," says Tara, helping me out.

"Yeah."

"Well, everyone here at TSN is rooting for you."

"I appreciate that."

"Thanks so much for joining us today, Cameron." Tara smiles at the camera. "Our viewers at home can watch Cameron play on the St. Anne Lions, or tune in to the NHL draft. Stay tuned for some baseball spring training analysis, right after the break."

The lights dim and I take a shaky breath. Tara shakes my hand.

As I step down from the set, Mom is there, brushing imaginary dust off my shoulders.

"That was great," she says.

"Mom, please don't cry."

"I'm not!" She smiles and smooths over my tie. "I'm not."

I hug her. I'm way taller than her now. She smells like clean perfume and rain.

~

A week goes by. Then two. Then three.

Fan mail comes spilling through the slot in the front door. Well, mostly fan mail.

Also, more people show up at home games now. The arena usually isn't sold out, but still, there's a difference.

I still don't know what I'm doing. No one wrote a fucking rule book. But I sleep, some nights, and I study math with Sam, and I go to practice everyday, and I go on walks with Hailey. That's our new thing, going on walks together.

"Cameron," she says one day. The snow finally melted, and now there's just a few patches of ice lining the streets. The sky is a pale, cloudless blue, and trees are starting to bud with green. "Are you gonna miss me when you move?"

"So much," I say.

"Where are you gonna go?"

"I'm not to sure yet. Whatever team picks me."

"Where do you wanna go?"

"I'd be happy anywhere. Where do *you* want me to go?"

"You can play in St. Anne."

"Well, there's not a team here."

"There should be." She kicks a pebble down the sidewalk and takes my hand. "You know, I like hockey."

"Do you?"

"Yeah."

"Me too, Hailey." I smile.

The thing is, I'm stuck in a weird state of waiting. Waiting for graduation, for draft day, to know who I am, to leave St. Anne, to miss St. Anne, to

leave Sam... but for now, I breathe in the chilly air with my little sister. What else am I supposed to do?

~

I'm unlacing my skates in the locker room after practice, lockers slamming around me, when my phone buzzes in my bag.

tom is in hospital, can you come?

"Shit," I mutter. Ethan yanks on a sweatshirt and looks at me.

"Dude," I say. "I'm sorry, but can you find another ride home?"

Ethan groans dramatically. "Cameroooon."

"I'll owe you one, okay? I really can't tonight. Something came up."

"I can drive you home, Ethan!" Ollie smiles and waves from the other side of the locker room.

Ethan frowns. "Isn't that in the opposite direction of where you are?"

"Yeah, but don't worry about it!"

"Great," I say. I pull on sweatpants and sling my bag over my shoulder. "See you guys tomorrow."

"What's the rush, Cameron?"

The sky outside is cloudy and black, and the air is cold against my skin. It takes three times for the car to start.

The hospital. I *hate* the hospital. It makes my stomach twist just thinking about it. But the car takes me there. Right on Wells, left on Main, block after block of yellow streetlights and lit up homes, the orange glow of cigarettes and the dirty exhaust from old factories.

Sam is sitting in the corner of the waiting room. He looks exhausted.

"Sam?"

He glances up at me.

"How - what - how's Tom?" I sit beside him.

"He's okay," Sam says. "The doctor just came out and talked to me. Just an unusually severe reaction to the medication, he said. But he'll be fine."

"That's good. That's good."

He rubs his face. "Thanks for coming. You don't have to stay." God, he sounds so, so tired.

"Sam, you should rest. You want to take a nap?"

"No, no, I'm okay."

"Okay. But I'll stay."

"Okay."

So we just sit there in the waiting room far longer than we have to, under the bright lights, as other tired people chatter around us. At some point, he finds my hand.

Things are supposed to work out in the end. But when is the end?

A/N okay lol to answer Cameron's question: I want to give you guys a heads up before the ending, which I think is going to be in around 3-4 chapters? maybe a bit more, but we'll have to see.

also, keep in mind this is a very very very very very veryy rough first draft haha, so a) yeah very rough b) I'm gonna try really hard to end this without forgetting any details that should be wrapped up, since it's published I can't really go back and add in random small stuff later. let's see how much I forget to include yay thanks so much to everyone reading / voting / commenting you guys are the true rock stars!!

40

I take Hailey and Veronica out to a celebratory dinner at AJ's. Not that we're celebrating anything specific. Veronica and I won't be eighteen for another few months, and even though graduation isn't too far off, it isn't anytime soon.

Still, though. The ice has finally all melted, and everything outside smells fresh and clean and everyone seems happier. Besides, can't I just take my sisters out to dinner without a reason?

Veronica eats all of the fried pickles and Hailey eats all of the French fries. The calming buzz of the restaurant hums around us, silverware clanking, bells chiming, and people chatting.

"I love French fries," says Hailey, dipping one in ketchup. "I wish I could eat French fries every day. I would eat them for breakfast."

"That might not be too healthy," says Veronica. She taps her blue fingernails on the table, her warm eyes wandering the shop. Her gaze finally lands on me. "Want a fried pickle, Cameron?"

"Sure," I say, even though for some reason, I'm not that hungry.

Hailey leans against my shoulder, her blonde hair spilling out of a messy ponytail. Her words are sleepy. "Cameron, are you gonna marry Sam?"

I frown. "Hailey! What? I'm seventeen."

"So?"

"People don't get married when they're seventeen."

Veronica nods in agreement and pops another fried pickle in her mouth.

"You can get married whenever you want, Cameron," says Hailey. "I give you permission."

"Alright. Thanks, Hailey." I roll my eyes and Veronica smiles from across the table.

Marriage. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Marrying Sam... seventeen year old guys don't think about that stuff.

I crunch on a fried pickle and breathe in the scent of hamburgers and chocolate, crack my knuckles on the table and smile tiredly at my twin sister.

"How's math going?" she asks. "Have you failed the class yet?"

"Nope. I'm a star student."

"Why don't I believe you?"

Hailey sits up straight. " *I'm* a star student."

I love my sisters. *Shit* , I love my sisters. I eat another fried pickle.

"Yeah, you're a star student, Hailey."

~

That night I watch an old movie on the couch. Hailey falls asleep beside me, and Mom is sitting at the kitchen table reading a book.

There's a knock at the door that pulls me out of my half-asleep state. Mom squints towards the window.

"Must be Sam," she says. "It's past ten o'clock, wouldn't be anyone else."

"I'll get it," I say groggily, rubbing my face and heading to the front door.

It's Sam. He's not wearing a sweatshirt like usual. Just a t-shirt. That's weird.

"Sam? What's wrong?"

"Why would something be wrong?"

"You're not - nevermind. You want to come inside?"

He steps inside, his light hair seeming to change colors under the warm, dim glow of the lamp. "Hi, Ms. Beckett," he says, smiling softly.

"Hello, Sam!" says Mom, glancing up from her book. She stares at him for a second. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, everything's good."

Hailey stirs and sits up on the sofa, her hair sticking up wildly. "Sam," she says tiredly. "Hi."

"Hi, Hailey. What are you watching?"

"I don't know, some stupid, boring old film Cameron put on." Alright, I'm gonna let that one go. She's always mad when she's tired.

"Oh no," says Sam, smiling. He sits on the edge of the couch. "You should go to bed soon."

"Yeah," Hailey mumbles. "Maybe. Except Veronica is talking on the phone to someone in our bedroom and she kicked me out."

Sam leans in and whispers something in her ear, and her face lights up. She laughs. And right then in that moment in the living room, darkness spilling in through the windows, lamps and warm lights throwing yellow shadows around, the television murmuring in the background, he's perfect. He's perfect.

We go to my room. He sits on my bed and leafs through a Spiderman comic.

"Spiderman used to be your favorite," he says more to himself, running a hand over the worn pages, and then he looks up and his eyes are wet.

"Sam? What's wrong?" I sit next to him, gently pull the comic out of his hands. "Why are you crying?"

"Cameron?"

"Yeah?"

His blue eyes shine. "I got a scholarship to Harvard."

"What? For what?"

"Four. Four years"

"I - I didn't realize you applied."

"I did awhile ago. I never thought that..." He bites his lip.

"Sam." I shake my head in disbelief. "That's amazing. That's incredible. Sam! Why are you sad?"

A tear runs down his cheek and he wipes it away. "I have to turn it down."

"Sam. Sam. Don't say that."

"I can't take it Cameron, I'm telling you. I can't! I can't."

Harvard. *Harvard* . Sam is so smart. Sam is so, so smart. Sam wants to work at NASA. Sam has an uncle with cancer.

"I don't want to talk about it," Sam says.

"Alright," I say. "Alright, Sam."

I hold him in my arms and tears leak out of his eyes.

You know, things are happening way too fast. Life is happening way too fast. So I just hold Sam. I hold him. And he is perfect.

A/N I'm sorry it's been forever since I updated! I'm also half-asleep right now so this chapter is probably not top notch lol! what do you think Sam should do? we're nearing the end folks

41

It rains forever. This happens every spring, it just rains non-stop for days. Hailey loves it. She puts on her boots and raincoat and splashes around outside.

The loud pounding of the rain against the car windows just gives Ethan an excuse to turn the radio up louder.

"I'm gonna miss this," he says, stretching out in the passenger seat on the way to practice.

"Don't get all sappy," I say.

"Have you been sleeping?"

"Yeah, Mom." I glance at him and feel bad. "I mean, yeah. Okay, I guess."

"You ready for the game tomorrow?"

"You bet."

Ethan adjusts his baseball hat and nods along to the beat of the song. "Luke was talking bad about you today," he says suddenly. "At school."

"Okay."

"Should I tell you that? Are you mad?"

I pull up to a red light, the brakes squeaking, and relax my grip on the steering wheel. "No," I say, switching the windshield wipers to a faster setting. "I'm not mad."

Ethan studies me. "You're definitely mad."

"Shut up." I stare at the light until it turns green. It finally does.

I guess I am still mad. It's not like people have stopped talking about me. I hate going online.

fag

Yeah, well, fuck those anonymous comments. And fuck Luke, too. But my heart doesn't beat as fast when I get fan mail, and I feel like the wave of attention on me has died down in the past few weeks. I'm just here to play hockey. And be myself, whatever that means.

"Anyway," says Ethan. "I shoved Luke and told him off. He's always been a prick. Why were we ever friends with the guy?"

"Good question."

"Yeah, good question. What a piece of shit. And he sucked at hockey."

"He was the worst."

"The absolute worst."

I smile, and Ethan does too. We're both wearing our St. Anne Lions sweatshirts, navy blue and soft on the inside.

~

I stuff my hands in my pockets and rock on my toes, the grass damp and dewy beneath my sneakers. Above me, the sky is scattered with stars. Faint smoke is spilling from the factory down the block, but besides that, the night is clear. It's the first night it hasn't rained in days.

Sam adjusts the telescope for Hailey, who leans into it enthusiastically. Behind me through the window, I can see Mom cleaning up in the kitchen.

"The constellation you're looking at is Orion," says Sam. "See it? It's in the shape of a hunter."

"I see it! I see it!" says Hailey, even though part of me thinks she's just saying that.

"Two of the brightest stars make up part of Orion - one of the stars is named Betelgeuse. It's around 20 times more massive than the sun."

"That's really big."

"The immense heat consumes the original hydrogen, so in a way, it fuses the atoms together to make helium and create energy. It then fuses the helium to create heavier elements, like iron, until the star can no longer produce energy in the core. Without reactions in the core, gravity causes the core to collapse, creating a neutron star. A titanic explosion then happens in the star's outer layers, known as a supernova..." he trails off and glances at me.

Even in the dark, I can see he's blushing a bit. I like it when he talks about things like that. Information is just on the tip of his tongue, he doesn't even have to think about it, and his voice gets so rich and woven and interested.

"Wow," I say, even though I have no idea what he just said.

"Wow," Sam agrees, and smiles. I take his hand.

"I want to be a scientist," says Hailey, still peering into the telescope. She's wearing her favorite yellow rain jacket."I like space."

"Me too, Hailey," says Sam. Standing so close to him, I can smell the clean soap he uses, and I want to kiss him.

"I really like space," says Hailey, and I look up. I don't look away from the vast night sky until my neck starts to hurt.

~

I shift my heavy backpack on my back and step through Sam's front door, the knob smooth and faded under my hand.

"Sam?" I call. "Shit, I totally forgot about a math packet I have to do and it's due tomorrow. Mrs. Godfrey, I swear that women is making the class harder even though midterms are over and we're all seniors in the class, except for like, two people..." I shut the door behind me and glance around the room.

"Hi, Cameron."

Tom's voice makes me jump, and he walks out of the kitchen with a mug of coffee in his hand. Well, more like limps, really. His voice is strained, and he looks skinnier.

"Tom!" I say. "I'm sorry, Sam told me just to come in. We were going to study."

"That's okay," says Tom, sitting down on the couch and wincing slightly. He's wearing a faded plaid shirt that looks too big on him. "I sent Sam out to the grocery store. He should be back soon. You want to have a seat?"

I sit down in the armchair and set my backpack against the coffee table. "Um," I say slowly. "How have you been?"

"Great," says Tom, smiling weakly. He runs his hand over his chin, which is covered in a thin layer of grey stubble. He looks paler, too. I haven't seen him in weeks. "The treatment is going well."

"That's good," I say, sitting on my hands.

"And I'm a fighter, eh, Cameron?" He chuckles weakly. "Sam is worried."

"Yeah."

"You need to tell that boy to relax. I'm not going anywhere anytime soon."

"Yeah. I mean, I will."

Tom sighs and leans back on the sofa. "You're good for him, you know."

"Really?"

"Just tell him to relax, more. He needs to relax." Tom's eyes shut, and he sighs again.

Sam is good for me. Sam is good for *me* . I didn't know I was good for Sam, too. I smile, even though Tom can't see me.

"He really loves you," I say, but Tom's breathing is long and deep and I guess he's asleep. I wonder what kind of medicine he's taking. I wonder if cancer hurts a lot.

It starts to rain again, soft at first, then growing louder and steadier against the windowpanes. I sit in the messy living room with Tom for ages, glancing around at old family pictures on the wall until Sam gets home, drenched with water.

A/N I love you readers

42

The St. Anne Lions lost in the playoffs. Semi-finals. In overtime, too.

In the locker room afterwards, everyone is silent, pulling on sweatshirts and looking around at each other. I wipe the sweat from my forehead and pull on my running shoes, my heart still pounding from the game.

Matthew leans against a shiny blue locker and clears his throat. "We had a great season, boys."

Then all the tension deflates, and everyone starts talking. And shit, I'm sad. And everyone is sad.

"A great season," I agree, and Matthew catches my eye and smiles.

Coach comes in and gives us the end-of-season pep talk. A lot of players will still be on the team next year. Not me. Not me. Coach gives me a bear hug on the way out.

As Ethan and I are walking through the doors, Matthew runs after me.

"Hey, Beckett," he says, slowing down his walk to match my pace. "I just wanted to say... you were a good co-captain."

He sticks out his hand, and I shake it. "So were you," I say. And I'm not lying.

"NHL. Shit." He shakes his head in disbelief.

"Yeah."

"I'm glad we played together."

"Yeah, we were a good team."

"When we wanted to be."

"Yeah, when we wanted to be." I smile, and then Matthew walks away, his hockey bag slung over his shoulder.

In the car, Ethan doesn't put on the 80s station, and instead to some weird station that's playing slow, sad songs.

"God, Ethan, turn that shit off."

He leans his head against the window and sighs dramatically. "We coulda had it all."

"Yeah." In overtime, too. Shit. We coulda had it.

"I'm never gonna play hockey on the same team with you again."

I shake my head and bite my lip. "Ethan, shut up."

"Dude. Are you gonna cry? Cause I'm gonna cry."

"Dude. We still have the rest of high school together."

He sighs again. "I know."

But I know, too. My career in the CHL is over. Officially. Things are happening, now. Really fast. And I'm never going to play hockey with Ethan again.

~

At home, Mom just kisses my cheek and leaves me alone for the rest of the night. I stay in my room, flipping through old comic books and tossing my baseball up in the air.

I glance at the hockey trophies and medals lined up on my shelf, and stand up suddenly to look at them. I haven't thought about these in ages. I run my hand over the cold textures, the statue of a stick or a hockey player.

There's a shoebox hidden behind larger trophies that I pull out, that's crammed haphazardly with cheap, little kid medals. I sit on my bed, the springs squeaking under the quilt, and pull them out one by one.

A few memories come flooding back. My first pair of skates. My first jersey, an emerald green color. Certain rinks around St. Anne where I remember small details, like the smell of the lobby or the broken sink in the bathroom.

At the bottom of the shoebox, there's a thin stack of photographs that I pull out. I'm eight years old and shooting a puck. I'm six and smiling toothlessly with a stick in hand. I'm five, playing ball hockey in the driveway with Veronica and my father. All of the pictures are grainy and blurry, time stamped in the corner with the date.

There's one photo of just my mother and father, back when they were in high school. I've never seen it before. My mother is young, her blonde hair long and curly, her smile wide and genuine, and she's leaning against my father. My father is laughing at the camera, his arm around my mother, and he's wearing a jersey with the number 21.

I put the photos back and the medals back and the shoebox back and stick it back on my shelf. I lie down on my bed and stare at the Maple Leafs poster on my ceiling. Shit.

~

The next day, Mom sends me out to pick up groceries. When I get back, Sam is sitting at the kitchen table with her.

"Hey," I say slowly, setting the plastic grocery bags down on the counter. They're damp from the faint drizzle spitting down from the sky.

Mom looks up at me, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Hey, honey."

Sam smiles weakly at me. He's wearing a pale blue sweatshirt.

I toss the car keys on the table. "What's going on?"

"We're just talking," says Mom, and I frown. On the table, there are papers and envelopes fanned out.

"Alright," I say.

"We just finished up, though," says Mom, and she nods at Sam.

What the fuck?

We go to my bedroom and I shut the door. "What was that?" I ask.

Sam sits on the ground against my bed and shuts his eyes. His eyelashes are so long. Have I said that before? "University," he says tiredly.

"What about it?"

"Your mom just wanted to talk to me about it."

I sit beside him. "Oh," I say quietly.

He opens his eyes and his gaze meets mine. His eyes are so blue and bright and deep that I almost want to look away, but I don't.

"Hey, Cameron?" he whispers.

We're so close that I can count every faint freckle on his face. "Yeah?"

"Do you think I'm a bad person if I go to university?"

"No, Sam. You're definitely not a bad person."

He glances away. "I don't know."

"You're not."

"I should be here for my uncle."

"This is your future."

"I know. But I feel horrible. I don't know what to do." He half-smiles. "Trina texted me the other day. Said that if I don't go to university, she's going to kill me."

"Yeah, sounds like her."

"Yeah."

"And, you know, my mom will be here. And Hailey, and Veronica. They'll take care of your uncle. He'll be okay."

Sam rests his head on my shoulder, and I breathe in his hair. "Maybe," he whispers.

"You're a really good person."

The best. He looks up and kisses me, and he tastes like the stars.

~

Mom gets a cold and doesn't feel like cooking, so I take Hailey with me to AJ's to pick up take-out for the family. She holds my hand on the way there, swinging her ladybug-patterend umbrella with the other hand. It's not raining out, but she insists on taking it anyway.

"Guess what I'm going to get, Cameron?" she says as we walk through the front door. It's busier inside than it normally is, the chatter and laughter loud, and a song plays in the background.

"What?"

"French fries."

I smile and stand in line for the register. "That sounds really good, Hailey."

A voice behind me says, "Hey, Cameron?"

I glance over my shoulder. "Hey - Henry!"

It's Henry. The scrawny freshman. God, that was a long time ago. He's wearing a red sweater and nerdy glasses, and he's smiling sheepishly.

"How are you?" I ask.

"I'm doing good!" says Henry. "I'm here with my, uh... boyfriend." He blushes. Like someone else I know.

"Hello," says Hailey loudly.

I pull Hailey's hand. "That's great," I say.

"Yeah." Henry smiles. "Anyway, just thought I'd say hi. And congrats on the hockey season, I watched the last game the other day. You're graduating soon, right?"

"You bet."

"Then the NHL." He shakes his head. "Crazy. Well, everyone's rooting for you."

"Thanks, Henry."

"Have you been honestly doing okay? With the whole situation?"

I glance down at Hailey, who's tugging at my hand, bored, then back at Henry. "It's been okay," I say. "A lot of pressure. But..."

"Yeah, I understand," says Henry, nodding. "Anyway, I should go. I'll see you around."

"Bye, Henry."

"And Cameron - thanks, seriously." And then he walks towards the booths along the back wall, disappearing behind customers and waiters.

"Who was that?" asks Hailey.

I pull my view away from him. "A friend, I guess."

"Are you gonna get French fries, Cameron?"

"Um, yeah."

Hailey blinks up at me. "Are you okay, Cameron?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." I squeeze her hand and we step up to order.

Yeah, I'm okay.

A/N oh my god... do we only have one chapter left? GUYS omg!! maybe 2 more? maybe 1 more though? ohh my god... I'll post on my message board when I'm 100% certain how many chapters there are left and when I'll post them so be on the lookout. GUYS! omg (edit) it's official, the last chapter will be posted July 31 (today) at 9 pm EST

43 - The End

We graduated. We graduated. I passed math class with a C+, and I walked down the stage after Veronica and took my diploma and shook the principal's hand and I graduated. Sam graduated. He won some awards, too. I don't know. Mom cried. Tom was there. *God* . We did it.

I've never been to New York City before.

"I've never been to New York City before," Sam says.

"Me neither," I say. I turn to look out the window as the buildings get smaller and smaller, thousands of miles below the airplane. We pass through a cloud and turbulence gently shakes the plane, and my grip tightens on the armrest.

Sam takes my hand, his warm fingers intertwining with mine, and rubs his thumb into my palm. "Do you think Tom is okay?"

I glance over at him. "Yeah, Tom is okay," I say. "Don't worry."

A nurse is staying with Tom for a couple nights while me, Mom, Veronica, Hailey, and Sam are in New York.

Sam bites his fingernails with his free hand. "Okay."

I lean in closer to his ear, smell the sweet, clean shampoo that he always smells like. "You don't have to worry," I say again, quieter. "Tom is totally fine."

He smiles softly. "Okay, Cameron."

"Okay, Sam."

From across the aisle, Hailey leans as far out of her seat as possible. "Hi, Sam!" she says loudly, even though the aisle is narrow and they can't be

more than four feet apart.

"Hi, Hailey," says Sam. "Are you excited?"

"Yeah!" She grins widely. Her hair is in two French braids, and beside her, Veronica and Mom flip through magazines.

The airplane is cold and filled with the constant murmur of chatter, yawns, and a baby that's crying in the back. Sam's blue eyes blink up towards the ceiling, a row of buttons and air vents.

New York City. I've never been to New York City. But that's where the NHL draft is this year. *Shit* . It's here.

For some reason, I feel like crying. But I just clear my throat and look out the window, at the pale blue sky and sprawling acres of green below. Because Sam is going to Harvard in the fall.

He waited until the last minute to decide. Last minute meaning two weeks ago. The conversation went something like this:

Sam: Shit.

Mom: Don't swear, Sam. Cameron is rubbing off on you.

Sam: I can't do this. I should put it off for another year or two, stay here.

Tom: I want you to do this, Sam.

Sam: But, Tom -

Tom: Sam, you can't turn down a full scholarship like this. I'll be fine.

Sam: I don't know. What do you think, Cameron?

Me: I think you should do it, Sam.

And that was hard to say. One of the hardest things I've ever said. My chest got all tight and my heart hurt a lot.

I mean, I know I'm right. I know Sam needs to go to Harvard. He's so smart. He's going to work at NASA. He's going to do something crazy important - way more important than play hockey, that's for sure.

I like Sam. I like Sam a lot. I mean - you know what I mean. I don't know how I'm going to live without him. I didn't even know who I was before him. I didn't know I could like - I mean - you know what I mean - someone like this. I wish I could tell him these things. But I'm not as good with words as he is.

God, the hopeful part of me thinks that maybe the Boston Bruins will draft me. Maybe I'll play hockey in Boston, Sam and I can get an apartment together - *god* - he can tell me all about school and astronomy and he can watch my hockey games and we can watch old movies together. But I can't think like that.

"Cameron?" He squeezes my hand. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just tired."

"Me too."

Eventually, he falls asleep, his breathing deep and steady, his chest rising and falling slowly, twitching in his sleep every once in awhile. I wonder what he's dreaming about. The sky turns to a deep shade of blue and purple, lazy clouds swirling in the distance. Everything is so pretty up here. A part of me never wants the plane to land.

The intercom dings on. "This is your pilot speaking. We are beginning our descent into New York City, please return to your seat and strap into your seatbelt. Thank you for choosing to fly with us today, and have a great rest of your evening."

Sam stirs awake.

The plane lands.

~

The hotel is nice, one of the nicest ones I've stayed in - the NHL paid for it. The lobby is filled with fancy people and it smells like smoke, and elevators are fast.

We're on the twenty-first floor.

"Like your number, Cameron," says Hailey, bouncing excitedly in the elevator. She clutches to her small floral suitcase.

We have three rooms, because in Mom's words, "Over my dead body are you and Sam sharing a hotel room. Good lord." Veronica and Mom in one, Hailey and I in another, and Sam gets the third one to himself.

Hailey immediately flops on the bed and makes snow angels on the fluffy white sheets. "It's so comfortable!" she shrieks. "Lie down on your bed, Cameron, feel it!"

"In a minute," I say, and instead go to the window. The city blinks up, lights flashing through the glass, people walking and smoking and laughing on the street, cars honking, a siren wailing.

Then Hailey throws a pillow at me, and so I pull away from the view and swing a pillow back at her. We fight until her hair is all messed up and she's laughing so hard she's nearly crying, which I think means I won.

There's a knock on the door and I pull it open. It's Sam.

"Hey." He smiles, pulls his sweatshirt sleeves over his hand. His hair is damp and he smells clean, like he just got out of the shower. "Thought I'd say goodnight."

"You want to come in?"

He steps inside the hotel room and laughs when he sees Hailey sprawled out exhaustedly on her bed.

"I just beat her in a pillow fight," I explain.

She sits up quickly. "You did *not* beat me!"

"Hailey, go shower in Mom's room."

"Why can't I shower here?"

"Cause - cause I said so."

She jumps off the side of the bed and walks past me, shaking her head. "Fascist," she mutters.

When she's across the hallway, I shut the door behind her and smile, glancing back at Sam. "Did she just call me a fascist?"

"I might have been talking to her about government systems the other day."

God, I just want to kiss him. So I do. His soft, warm lips press against mine, his heartbeat pressed against mine. His skin and muscles are hard and smooth under the cotton of his sweatshirt.

I've never kissed Sam like this before. Like I need to keep kissing him to survive. Maybe I do. Like it's the last time I can kiss him like this. Maybe it is.

I push my hand into his damp hair, press my hand against his neck, his chest, feel his heart underneath my fingertips. I want to yank his sweatshirt off. I don't know where to stop. I don't think I want to stop at all.

"Cameron." He blinks his eyes open.

I'm breathing heavy and my heart is pounding. "I'm sorry."

"No - it's not that." He smiles. "It's just - can I tell you something?"

"Yeah."

"I think I kinda love you."

Love. I don't think I know what that means. Is this what love feels like?

"I think I kinda love you too," I say.

"That's crazy."

"Yeah. We're fucked."

He laughs. I rest my hand on his neck.

Sam. I really care about you. You made me a better person. I'm sorry for a lot of things. You're so nerdy and smart and hot. I want to make out more. God, I really kinda love you right now.

All these things I want to say, and I don't.

"I should go to my room before Hailey gets back," Sam says softly.

"Okay."

"I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight."

He kisses me again, soft and slow like honey, and then he's gone. Hailey gets back in a few minutes, smelling like strawberry shampoo and wearing her princess pajamas.

She falls asleep fast. I don't sleep at all.

~

In the morning, the five of us sightsee the city. We see the Statue of Liberty, we go down Times Square, we buy street hot dogs, we walk around Central Park. There's a nice breeze that rolls in from the water, and trees are blooming with flowers.

By the late afternoon, we start getting ready. I put on my nicest suit and my favorite blue tie, and splash on cologne.

We meet in the lobby. Hailey, Veronica, and Mom all look beautiful. Hailey in her purple dress, Veronica with her straightened hair and shiny lip gloss,

and Mom with her silver cross necklace that she only wears on special occasions.

And Sam. Yeah, Sam looks beautiful too.

The convention center is packed with people, the stage set up nicely and tables sprawled across the floor. I lose my family in the crowd as I'm pulled away for pre-draft interviews.

Something like hope pounds in my heart. It's me and a few other players that are the top runners for first pick - an American, another Canadian I've played against a couple times, and a Swedish player. It's anyone's game, that's what everyone is saying. It's not impossible for me to be drafted by the Boston Bruins.

As evening rolls around, we take out seats. Sam on my left, Mom on my right. I know there are cameras pointed towards me - I can see them out of the corner of my eye. I recognize other players in the seating around me, say hello to a few people I know.

Mom leans in close to my ear. She smells like clean perfume and rain. "No matter what happens tonight, I'm really proud of you," she says. She squeezes my arm.

"Thanks, Mom," I say, and I feel like crying again and I don't know why.

God, it takes forever for the event to start. So many reporters are down on the floor, speaking enthusiastically into cameras. I don't even want to know how many people are watching.

"Sam..." I lower my voice. "Can I do this?" I'm nervous. I'm so nervous.

He smiles. "You can do this."

"Are you sure I can do this?"

He turns and looks right at me, so I soak up every detail of every freckle, every eyelash, the curves and edges of his face, the blue of his eyes, no more bruised skin. "I'm absolutely sure you can do this."

If there weren't thousands of people and dozens of cameras around me, I just might've kissed him.

"Okay," I say, smiling. "If you're sure."

"I am."

"Alright."

He smiles too. "Alright."

The minutes count down towards the start of the draft. If I could freeze time, I think I would now, just for a little bit.

God, the NHL. That's crazy. I blink up towards the bright lights and sigh, trying to steady my breathing. The sound of ice. The trophies that line my shelf. George. Coach. My favorite hockey stick. Black eyes. Blood. Church. School hallways. Letters. My pre-calculus textbook. Hospitals. Ethan. Cancer. Snow that sticks to eyelashes and melts against freckles. Cemeteries. Sweatshirts. Matthew. Leo Tolstoy. Black and white movies that hum through speakers. Dreams. Mom. Fevers. My father. Sam.

Sam squeezes my hand. "It's about to start. You good?"

I blink quickly and breathe sharply. "I'm good. You?"

"Yeah."

I would like to play in Boston. But I don't have a choice in the matter. Just like I didn't have a choice about getting a math tutor back in the fall. *Can you find a tutor or something? Do so. Immediately. Or you're benched tomorrow.*

The draft officially starts. The lights dim, and Sam squeezes my hand. I don't even know if I'm breathing. I'm so aware of the plastic seating, Sam's hand in mine, the fit of the suit over my skin, the men that shuffle to the stage, the excited murmur of the crowd.

An older man taps the microphone and slowly clears his throat. *God* . "For their first-draft pick, the Toronto Maple Leafs are proud to announce, from St. Anne, Canada, Cameron Beckett." And then that's it. And then it's all over.

I stand up as lights flash around the convention center, finding me in the crowd. Mom bursts into tears and hugs me. Hailey is jumping up and down. Veronica hugs me, whispers, "I love you, little brother." Sam hugs me, not long enough.

I walk to the stage and shake people's hands and pull a Toronto Maple Leaf jersey over my suit, and pull a Leafs baseball hat over my head, smile. Things are happening way too slowly way too fast. *I'm a Toronto Maple Leafs player* . What the fuck is happening? The crowd is on their feet, cheering. God, I'm so happy. I'm so sad. But I'm so happy.

As I step down from the stage, adrenaline coursing through my veins, a reporter pops up beside me.

"Cameron, congratulations on being the first pick! How excited are you right now that you'll be playing for Toronto?"

I smile at the journalist, pull my hat lower on my head. "It's crazy. I don't even know how to explain how I'm feeling right now. Toronto is such a great city, and I've been a fan of the Leafs since I was little."

"Cameron, this makes you the first openly gay player to play in the NHL. What does that mean to you?"

"So much. I hope I do my best in representing the community."

"Cameron, thanks so much for speaking with us. Congrats again!"

I don't even know what happens after that. More interviews, asking similar question. So many pictures. So many handshakes. Mom appears and brushes invisible dirt off my shoulder, straightens my tie, smiles up at me. Hailey shrieks and jumps into my arms. Cameras follow me.

The draft goes on. After a couple hours, in an empty, back hallway of the convention center, I find Sam. I pull him into a hug so tight, breathe into his hair.

"I'm so proud of you," he says in my shoulder.

I'm trying not to cry. It's not really working. "Sam."

"Cameron."

"Toronto to Harvard is a nine hour drive. Less by train. *Shit* ."

"Cameron." He pulls back, looks at me. His face is perfect. "I'm so proud of you."

I don't want to let him go. *War and Peace* . Story of my life. What part am I in now, the war or the peace part? If Sam was a book, I would read it forever. "Sam. I'm so proud of you too."

"We did it."

"Yeah, we did it."

"Cam, I kinda love you."

"Sam, I kinda love you too."

He smiles. I smile, too.

Is this what happiness feels like?

Maybe.

I think it is.

~

~

~

The End

A/N too much to say go to next chapter for author's note

Author's Note

ALKSJDLKSJDLAKSLDKASJDLAKDASDLAKJSD

you guys

I have so much to say

did I just

did I

did I really just finish this book

okay I need to make a list cause my thoughts are all over the place right now

deep breaths

1) THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU soooooo much for reading this book. Everyone's support means so much to me, I have the best readers ever! I love you guys so much and could not have done this without you!!!

2) Okay, this is one of my favorite books I've written... I don't even... I just.... don't know what I'm saying right now my emotions are very all over the place. I'M SO EMOTIONAL

3) If you have ANY questions, whether it's about the book, my writing, myself, whatever, either comment or PM me and I'll probably include a Q&A chapter! So ask away!!!

4) Alright, I've said this a lot throughout the book so here's it again lol: this is a very rough draft, and a ton of editing has to be done! Not so much grammar wise, but plot wise and pacing wise, the story will definitely need to be changed. Just keep that in mind! ;)

5) Some things I really focused on while writing this were character development, subtle internal thoughts, pacing, dialogue, simple and realistic writing... and I think I have improved a bit on those overall! This book was such a fun challenge, and such a personal one, too. I also didn't label this book "bxb" in the title if anyone's wondering because, although yeah it is, I want it to be more than that. I wanted to incorporate a lot of other important themes, like family, self-doubt, school, friends, religion, what happiness means, anxiety... (did I do a good job on spreading themes evenly? unlikely lol! refer back to point #4!)

6) Did I mention how grateful of you guys I am? Cause thank you

7) So about a sequel: will there be one in the future? Most likely, YES! So keep this book in your library and such for updates on the sequel. However, this will NOT happen in the extremely near future. School is starting again soon, and life is about to get super crazy! Plus, I have a few other projects I'm working on off Wattpad. So... probably, yes. In the future! There is just so much more to write about these characters :) (**EDIT** : yep there is now a sequel!! check it out!!)

8) I'm missing some points

9) Honestly thank you so much you guys. The past two months writing this have been so crazy and fun

10) I can't believe I just finished a rough draft? ... I just finished writing the last chapter and I already miss it

11) I love these characters

12) If you enjoyed this book and wanted to recommend it to any of your friends / peeps that also might like it, that'd be cool!!

13) Oh yeah, and if you weren't a hockey fan before, you now have to cheer for the Maple Leafs! :)

14) Last point: THANK YOU GUYS AGAIN I KINDA REALLY LOVE YOU ALL

- M

SEQUEL INFO

Hey guys! Wow, it's been awhile since I've clicked "add chapter" on this story. Awww.

Time for a rambling list:

1) **The sequel is finally happening!!** My god, I've missed these characters!! I'm so excited!

2) It's up on my profile right now, titled **The Multitudes Within Me** . Add it to your library so you won't miss the first chapter, which will be published in a few days! Also gives you some time to reread TSOI and refresh your memory, just in case it's been awhile. ;)

3) The sequel will be in Sam's POV! We're gonna pick off a few months from where we left off - Cameron is playing for the Leafs in Toronto, Sam is at Harvard in Boston, and Tom is battling cancer.

4) Did I mention I'm super excited?

5) Questions? Concerns? Comments? Things you wanna see happen? Things you don't wanna see happen? Hit me up and share your thoughts!

6) Thank you guys in advance!!! Wow I can't wait. Kinda love you all ;)

- M

P.S. Are there any artists out there? Playlist-making folks? I'd die if there was any fanart of Sam&Cam, I'll definitely feature it in the book!

Fanart

hey guys!! this chapter is for the majority of the sam&cam fanart. there are a few pieces that are spoiler-ish of The Multitudes Within Me (the sequel) so there'll be over there. the rest are here, so enjoy! & feel free to send me anything else you crazy talented people make! :)

by iSawJamesFirst - holy shit is this not freaking incredible wOW I love it!!!

~

by @illustraice - im crying this is SO adorable!!!!!!!!! (should i feature it as the book cover for a bit??)

~

by mikaela_1873 - look how CUTE i'm dying

~

by Caertheand - AMAZING WHAT THE FUCK

~

by MissoMILLA - askdjhaksdjha i loveee

~

by itsdannyb - i'm in LOVE with this style holy shit

~

by sad-witch - look at this cute lil sam!!!!

~

the details!!!! <3 by @ salty.pangolin on Instagram